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# LEONORA D'ORCO.

## CHAPTER I.

LORENZO had mounted the many steps leading to the top of the belfry of the church, and there, with the old monk who was keeping watch, he gazed over the beautiful valley of the Arno. High—high up in the air he stood, far above the rocks and tree-tops, with the whole country round, as it were, mapped out before him. The sun was rapidly nearing the horizon, and there was that undefinable transparent purple in the atmosphere which in Italy precedes, for nearly an hour, the shades of night; but yet all was still

clear, and bright, and the various objects in the landscape could be distinguished perhaps more sharply than in the full light of day.

"There they go," said the old monk who was on watch, pointing with his hand in the direction of the mountains. "They have a good guess that the people of Florence would not have them here much longer, and so they are taking themselves away."

Lorenzo turned his eye in the direction to which the monk pointed, and saw, winding along the mountain road to San Miniato, a long troop of horse, evidently the same which had been ranging the Valley of the Arno. He watched them over the several undulations of ground, now disappearing, now rising again into sight, till at length the foremost horseman reached the gap over the farthest hill in view, and one by one they passed out of the range of vision, except a small party which

lingered for a moment or two on the side of the hill, as if taking a survey of the country they were leaving, and then, following their companions, disappeared.

"I must go down and tell the prior," said the monk; "but I may as well ring the bell as I go, to let the people of the country know they are gone."

Thus saying, he began to descend; but Lorenzo lingered still a few minutes on the top of the tower, while the great bell below him tolled out in quick, and, to his ear, joyful tones, the announcement to the whole country round that the brutal marauders had departed. Hardly had three or four strokes been given upon the bell when Lorenzo could perceive a number of women issuing from the various peasants' houses in sight, and taking their way by narrow mountain paths towards the monastery of the villa.

He followed the monk down, however, without much delay, and at the base of the belfry found the old man talking with the prior between the church and the tower.

"Come with me, my son," said the prior; "I can now keep my promise with you;" and he led him on through the close around the church, through the cloisters, and through a long, dimly-lighted passage, which opened by a key at the prior's girdle, and the next moment Lorenzo found himself in a small octagonal room, the arched ceiling of which was supported by a light column in the centre. It seemed well and tastefully furnished, and on one of the sides was a little recess, where hung a crucifix and a vessel of holy water.

"Wait here, my son, a few minutes," said the monk; "as soon as the women come up from below, the signora will join you. She can re-

main with you till the hour you have named for your departure. Be wise, be good, and may God bless you and reunite you soon."

The light in the room was very dim, for the windows consisted only of those light plates of marble which have been mentioned before; and the prior, turning before he departed, added, "I will bid her bring a lamp, otherwise you will soon be in darkness."

He went not out by the same door through which he had entered, and Lorenzo could hear for some moments the fall of his sandal upon the pavement, as if he were walking through a long and vaulted passage. The sound ceased, and the young man's heart beat high with hope and expectation; but still many a minute elapsed—and to him they seemed long minutes indeed—before any sound again met his ear. Then there was a slight rustle, with a quick, light footstep, and through the chink of the door,

which the prior had left ajar, came a ray of light as from a lamp.

But poor Lorenzo was to be again disappointed. True, the door opened, and a female form appeared bearing a light; but it was that of a country girl, who, sitting down the lamp on the table, looked up in Lorenzo's face with a frank good-humoured smile, saying,

"The signora will be here as soon as I get back to attend on Mona Francesca."

Thus saying, she tripped away, and in a few moments more, a sound not to be mistaken met Lorenzo's ear, the well known fall of Leonora's foot, which had so often made his heart thrill in the halls of the Villa Rovera.

He could not wait till she had reached the room, but ran along the passage to meet her, and then she was in his arms, and then their lips were pressed together in all the warmth of young and passionate love, and then her face was hid

upon his bosom, and the tears poured forth abundantly; and then he kissed them away, and, with his arm cast round her, and her hand in his, he led her into the room to which the prior had conducted him.

Let us pass over some five or ten minutes, for all was now a tumult and confusion of sensations, and words, and caresses, which it would be difficult to distinguish, and which had meaning only for those who felt and heard them.

At length, when some degree of calmness was restored, the quick and eager explanations followed. Leonora told him how the news of the king's arrival at Pisa had been brought two days before by the peasantry, and how she had waited, and watched, and could not sleep, and rose while day was yet infirm and pale, in order not to lose one moment of his beloved company. Then she told him that on the morning of that eventful



day she had left her bed early, and was hardly dressed when the sound of horses' feet on the road had made her start to the window in the joyful hope that they had come at length. She saw strange arms and strange faces by the pale light of morning, but still she fancied they were French corps which she did not know; and, imagining that he must have dismounted and entered before his companions, she ran along the broad corridor to meet him. To her surprise and terror, however, she saw a stranger gorgeously habited and followed by two men in arms, and turning suddenly back, she fled towards her own apartments. She heard her own name called aloud, she said, and a sweet and musical voice bidding her stop; but, as if it were by instinct, she continued her flight. Then came a fierce oath, and an angry command to follow and bring her back.

"In Heaven's name, how did you escape, my beloved?" exclaimed Lorenzo, pressing her closely to him.

"Most happily," replied Leonora, "Mona Francesca—it was but yesterday—had made a great exertion for her, and shown me all the apartments of the villa, the passages, the corridors, and even the private way, which her husband constructed before his death, from the old part of the villa to the monastery above. He was a very pious man, she said, and often ascended by that passage to pray alone in the church. I know not why, but I had remarked the passage particularly, and the secret door that led to it; and, without any reason that I know of, I had opened and shut the door several times, as if to make myself completely mistress of the means. It would almost seem that I had a presentiment that my safety might depend upon it; and yet I do not remember any such feeling at

the time. Now, however, when I heard the footsteps of the three men following me fast, I darted past my own room, and, winged with fear, fled through the corridors toward the apartments of Mona Francesca; but I heard voices and loud words in that direction, and, turning sharply to the right through the old stone hall, I came suddenly on the secret door, and had opened, passed in, and closed it before I well knew what I was doing. I stopped as soon as I had entered the passage, and leaned against the wall for support, for I was terrified and out of breath with the rapidity of my flight. Every moment I expected to hear them, at the door, and, though it was well concealed in the masonry, feared they might discover it and break in. I suppose that my quickness in threading passages which they did not know had puzzled them, for I heard no steps approach the door while I stood there. But other and terrible sounds met my ear. I heard

the shrieks of women. Oh! dear Lorenzo, I heard the voice of my own poor girl Judita crying for mercy; and I fled onward to the monastery, hoping that the good monks might be able to give that help which I could not give. I know not well how I came hither, but it was through long passages, and up many flights of steps, and at last I found myself in the church. Nor can I well describe to you all that followed, for my brain seemed confused and stupified with terror. The prior, and, indeed, all the monks, were very kind to me; but when I besought them to go down and help the poor people in the villa, they shook their heads sadly, and pointed to the red light that was rising up over the tree-tops. The prior, however, brought me along these passages to a room beyond—it is in one of the towers upon the walls, I believe—and, leaving me there, told me I should be safe, and that he would go to see what could be done for my poor kins-

woman. Oh, Lorenzo, what a terrible half hour I passed there; and, at length, sorrow was added to fear, for they bore in upon a pallet poor Mona Francesco, living, it is true, and, I trust, likely to live, but dreadfully burned; her neck, her face, her hands, all scorched and swollen, so that you would not know her. She is suffering agony, and the livelong day I have sat bathing her with water from the cool well. I have had none to help me till a few minutes ago, for the peasant girls, it seems, have been afraid to come up as long as these terrible men were in sight. At length, however, the girl you saw just now arrived, and then the prior told me you were here, but must depart to-night. Oh, Lorenzo, is it so? and will you leave me again so soon?"

Lorenzo's tale had now to be related, and he told her all—the bond of honour which he felt himself under to accompany the King of France, and the hopes—the wild, delusive hopes—with

which he had come thither. Leonora listened sadly, and for a few moments after he had done speaking she sat silent, with the tears glittering in her eyes, but not overrunning the long black lashes.

“You must go, Lorenzo,” she said at length—  
“you must go. God forbid that I should keep you when honour and duty call you hence, though my selfish heart would say, ‘Stay.’ Oh that you had been a day earlier! Then all this day’s terrible agonies might have been spared us, and even the pain of parting which is before us. Willingly—willingly, my Lorenzo, would I have been your bride at an hour’s notice, and I do believe that poor Francesca would have gone with us. But now, oh Lorenzo! you cannot ask me to leave her. I know you will not. If you could see the agony she is suffering, you would not have the heart to do it.”

Lorenzo was silent, for the struggle in his

bosom was terrible. She spoke in such a tone that he thought he might still prevail if he had but the hardness to press her urgently, and yet he felt that he should esteem, if not love, her less if she yielded. He remained silent, for he could not speak; but at length her sweet voice decided him. "Lorenzo, strengthen me," she said; "I am very weak. Tell me—tell me that it is my duty to remain—that not even love can justify such a cruel, such an ungrateful act; and, as I tell you to go because honour calls you away, oh bid me to stay because it is right to do so."

He pressed her to his heart more fondly than ever; he covered her brow, her cheeks, her lips with kisses; he held her hand in his as if he never could part with it, and but few more words were spoken till the prior came to tell him his horses were prepared and his men mounted. Then came the terrible parting.

"Father," he said, "I leave her to your

care. Oh! you cannot tell what a precious charge it is! In a few weeks I will return to claim her as my own. Oh! watch over her till then. My brain seems disordered with the very thought of the dangers that surround her in these days of violence and wrong."

"Be calm, my son—be calm" said the prior. "Trust in a holier and more powerful protector. He has saved her this day; He can save her still. As for me, I will do all that weak man can do. But the first thing is to remove her, as soon as may be, to the city. Even such holy walls as these are no safeguard from the violence of man in these days; but in the city she will be secure. And now, my son, come. Do you not see how terribly a lingering parting agitates her? Do not protract it, but come away at once, and then rejoin her again, as soon as it is possible, to part no more."



Both felt that what he said was just, and yet one long, last, lingering embrace, and then it was over. All seemed darkness to the eyes of Leonora d'Orco as she sat there alone. All seemed darkness to Lorenzo Visconti as he rode away.

## CHAPTER II.

THIS is a cold age of a cold world. Not more than one man or woman, in many, many thousands can sympathise with—nay, can conceive the warm, the ardent love which existed between the two young hearts now separated. But it must be remembered that theirs was an age and a land of passion; and where that passion did not lead to vice and crime, it obtained sublimity by its very intensity.

It may be asked if such feelings were not likely to be evanescent—if time, and absence, and new objects, and a change of age would not

diminish, if not extinguish the love of youth  
Oh no! Both were of firm and determined  
natures; both clung long and steadily to impres-  
sions once received; and yet, when they next  
met, how changed were both!

They were destined to be separated far longer  
than they anticipated, and to show what was the  
reason and nature of the change they underwent,  
it would be necessary to follow briefly the course  
of each till the youth had become a man and the  
young girl a blossoming woman.

When Lorenzo reached Pisa with his little  
band, he found the army of the King of France  
about to march; indeed, the vanguard had  
already gone forward. In the retreat, however,  
the corps of men-at-arms to which he was at-  
tached brought up the rear, and thus he was  
spared the horror of seeing the butchery com-  
mitted by the Swiss infantry at Pontremoli.

Riding slowly on by the side of his commander

and friend, De Vitry, he conversed with him from time to time, but with thoughts far away and an insurmountable sadness of spirits. Indeed, the elder was full of light and buoyant gaiety; the younger was cold and stern. The cause was very plain; the one was leaving her whom he loved, the other approaching nearer every day to the dwelling of Blanche Marie. Many a danger and difficulty, however, hung upon the path before them. Hourly news arrived of gathering troops and marching forces, of passages occupied, and ambuscades; and at length, in descending from the Appenines towards the banks of the Taro, near its head, the scouts brought in intelligence that the allied forces were encamped at Badia, determined to oppose the passage of the river. It soon became evident that a battle must be fought somewhere between the small town of Fornovo and Badia, and the great numerical superiority of the confederate army

rendered the chances rather desperate for France. With the light-hearted courage of the French soldier, however, both men and officers prepared for the coming event as gaily as for a pageant, but the lay and clerical counsellors of the king saw all the dangers and lost heart. Again they had recourse to negotiation, and the confederate princes, with cunning policy, seemed willing for a time to sell, for certain considerations, a passage towards Lombardy to the King of France. They knew that Fornovo, where he was encamped, could only afford a few days' supply of provisions, and there is every reason to believe that they hoped, by delaying decision from day to day, to starve the royal army into a surrender. The king's counsellors might perhaps have been deceived; but his generals saw through the artifice, and it was determined at length to force the passage of the Taro.

I need not enter into all the details of the

battle of Fornovo, the only one at which the young King of France was ever present, but it is well known that if in the engagement he did not show all the qualities of a great commander, he displayed all the gallantry of his nature and his race. By sheer force of daring courage and indomitable resolution the passage was forced, and not by skill or stratagem. More than once the king's life or liberty was in imminent danger; and once he was saved by the boldness of a common foot-soldier, once rescued out of the very hands of the enemy by Lorenzo Visconti. It may easily be believed that the affection which existed between the young king and his gallant cousin was increased by the service rendered, and to the hour of Charles's death Lorenzo received continued marks of his regard, though some of them, indeed, proved baleful to the young man's peace.

The victory at Fornovo proved only so far  
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beneficial to the King of France as to enable him to negotiate with his adversaries from a higher ground. Slowly he advanced toward Milan, in order to deliver the Duke of Orleans, who, in bringing reinforcements to the monarch's aid, had been drawn into Novara and besieged by the superior forces of Ludovic the Moor. The position of both armies was dangerous. That of the king was lamentably reduced in numbers, and little was to be hoped from the French garrison in Novara, which was enfeebled by famine and sickness.

The army of the Duke of Milan, on the other hand, had much diminished since he commenced the siege, and his ancient enemies, the Venetians, were daily gaining a preponderance in Italy, which he saw would be perilous to his authority. The usual resource of negotiation followed. Peace was re-established between Charles and Ludovic Sforza. Novara was surrendered to

the latter, but the Duke of Orleans was suffered to march out with all the honours of war, yielding up the city in conformity with the terms of a treaty of peace, and not of a capitulation wrung from him by force of arms.

The King paused for a short time in Lombardy; festivities and rejoicings succeeded to the din of war; large reinforcements from France swelled his army to more than its original numbers, and for some time the idea was entertained at the court that Naples would be again immediately invaded, and its conquest rendered more complete. But hour by hour, and day by day, came intelligence from that kingdom more and more disastrous for the cause of France. A fleet of French galleys suffered a disastrous defeat; the people of Naples rose against the small French force remaining in the city, and drove them into the two citadels; town after town returned to the allegiance of the House of Arragon;



and the very day after the Battle of Fornovo the young King Ferdinand re-entered in triumph his ancient capital.

These events might well cause a change of purpose at the court of France; the work of reducing the kingdom of Naples was all to be done over again; and it was impossible for even the most oily flatterers of the king to conceal the fact that the attempt would be attended by difficulties which had not been experienced in the previous expedition. In fact, the people of Naples had learned what it was to submit to the yoke of France; all their vain expectations had been disappointed; they had found the burden intolerable; they had cast it off, and were resolved to die rather than receive it again.

In the meantime, however, from the aspect of the court and camp of France, no one could have supposed that it was a time of disaster and distress; all was gaiety, merriment, and light-hearted

irregularity; and friendships and loves, which had been formed the preceding year, were now renewed as if neither coldness nor hostilities had intervened.

In the midst of all these events a small party left the camp of the King of France and took its way toward the city of Pavia. They went lightly armed, as if upon some expedition of pleasure, and, indeed, the country for fifty miles on the other side of the Po was quite safe and free from all adverse forces; but beneath the Appenines on either side lay the armies of the confederates, blockading every pass, and cutting off communication between Northern and Southern Italy, except by sea. Thus, with no offensive and but little defensive armour, the party rode securely on till they reached the gates of the Villa Rovera, where the two first horsemen dismounted and entered the gardens.

The aspect of all things about the villa was

greatly changed since Lorenzo and De Vitry had been there before. There was a stillness, a gloomy quietness about the place which somewhat alarmed them both. In the great hall was seated but one servant, and when they inquired of him for the old count and the young lady, he answered,

“Alas! my lords, you do not know that his excellency is at the point of death.”

Such was the state of affairs when Lorenzo and his friend reached the dwelling of Blanche Marie, and what resulted from it must be told hereafter.

## CHAPTER III.

IN change lies all our joy; in change lies all our pain. Change is the true Janus whose two faces are always looking different ways. I know not whether it may please the reader, but I must change the place and the time, and change it so suddenly and so far as to pass over for a time, events not only interesting in themselves, but affecting deeply the fate of those who have formed the principal objects of my history. Yet it must be so, for there are inexorable laws established by judges against whom is no appealing, which limit the teller of a tale to a certain space;

and were I to relate in detail all the events which occupied the two years succeeding the events last mentioned in this book, I should far transgress the regulations of the craft, and perhaps exhaust the patience of my readers. Those events, therefore, must be gathered from others which followed, and, indeed, perhaps this is the best, as it certainly is the shortest way of giving them to the public.

There is a fine old chateau in the south of France, two towers of which are still standing, and hardly injured by the tooth of time. I have a picture of it before me by the hand of one who, born in lofty station and of surpassing excellence, was, as a beacon at a port of refuge, raised high to direct aright all who approached her, who lived not only honored, but beloved, and has not left a nobler or a better behind. Her eye can never see these lines; her ear can never hear these words; but I would that this work

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were worthy to be a monument more lasting than brass, to write on it an epitaph truer than any that ever consoled the living or eulogised the dead.

I have the picture before me, with two great towers standing on the wooded hill, with vineyards at the foot, and many a ruined fragment scattered round, showing where the happy and the gay once trod, and commenting silently upon the universal doom. Oh! a ruin is the best *momento mori*, for it tells not the fate of one, but of many generations, and gives to death that universality which most impresses the mind and most prepares the heart.

Those buildings were all fresh, and many of them new at the time of which I write. Not a century had passed since the first stone of the whole edifice was laid; and sumptuously furnished, after the fashion of those times, was the great suite of rooms occupying one floor of both

those great towers and of the connecting building, now fallen.

In one of these rooms was a fine hall, lighted by windows of many-colored glass, with two oriels or bays penetrating the thick walls and projecting into air, supported by light brackets and corbels of stonework without. The floor of those bays was raised two or three steps above the ordinary level of the hall, and each formed, as it were, a separate room within the room.

In one of those bays, just two years after the event which closed the last chapter, sat a tall, powerful man of perhaps thirty-six years of age, dressed in those gorgeous garments of peace which were common to the higher classes in that day. His face was somewhat weather-beaten; there was a scar upon his cheek and on his hand, and the short, curling hair over the forehead had been somewhat worn away by the pressure of the helmet. On the back of the

head and on the temples it flowed in unrestrained luxuriance, somewhat gray, indeed, but with the deep brown predominating.

At his knee, on a stool of Genoa velvet—it was her favourite seat—was a beautiful girl, seemingly sixteen or seventeen years of age, fair as a snow-drop, with light, flowing hair, and eyes of violet-blue, deep fringed and tender. Her head rested against his side, her arm lay negligently upon his knee, and those blue eyes were turned towards his face with a look of love—nay, almost of adoration.

They were De Vitry and Blanche Marie, some two months after their marriage. Her good old grandsire, on his bed of death, had committed her to the guardianship of the King of France with the request that in two years he would bestow her hand upon the gallant soldier, if she loved him still. Nor had that love for a moment faltered, while, under the care of fair



Anne of Brittany, she had passed the allotted time at the court of France; and now she was happy—oh! how supremely blessed with him whose character, without shade or concealment, with all its faults and all its perfections, had stood plain and straightforward from the first.

But why does De Vitry turn his eyes so often towards the window and gaze forth upon the road, which, winding down from the castle, ploughs its way through the thick vineyard, and, crossing the Isere by its bridge of stone, ascends the opposite slopes?

“Is he coming, love?” said Blanche Marie. “Do you see him, De Vitry? Yes, you do; there is the falcon look in your eyes. They are upon something now.”

“How can I tell what it is at this distance, lady mine?” answered her husband; “falcon, indeed, if I could see so far. There is a dark something moving yonder on the far verge of the

hills. It may be a train of horsemen; it may be some country carts, for aught I know. But, Madame Blanche," he added, casting his right arm round her, "by my fay, I shall be jealous of this Lorenzo, if you are so eager for his coming."

"Out, false knight," she answered; "I defy you to be jealous of any man on earth. To make you jealous is, alas! beyond my power, for, like a foolish girl, I have let you know too well how much I love you."

She spoke gaily, but the moment after she said, in a saddened tone:

"But poor Lorenzo! he is so unfortunate—so unhappy, De Vitry. I may well wish for my cousin's coming when I know that only with you and me he finds any consolation. And yet every time I see him I feel almost self-reproach, as if I had a share in making him so miserable. I loved her so; I believed her so good, so noble,

so kind, that I foolishly planned their marriage long before they ever met, and did all I could to promote their love when they did meet; and now to think that she should be so faithless, so cold, so cruel, when she knows he loves her more than life."

"It is indeed strange," said De Vitry with a clouded brow; "she seemed to me as she seemed to you, one of the noblest girls I ever saw. She is not married yet, however. That story is false. I saw a messenger from Rome three days ago. He says she is living with her father, who is now one of the vicars in the Church in Romagna, and she is certainly unmarried."

"That is but poor consolation for Lorenzo," replied Blanche Marie; "he has too much pride, too much nobility of heart, to take her hand now, were it offered him after such conduct."

"I trust he has," said De Vitry; "and were I he, I would cast her from my thoughts for ever. Beauty is something, my love, but there must be goodness, too; otherwise one might as well fall in love with a picture, my dear girl. But tell me, Blanche, when last she wrote to you did she show any such signs of strange caprice?"

"It is near eighteen months since she wrote at all," replied the young wife, "and then her billet, it is true, was somewhat strange and constrained, but it gave no indication of such a change. Oh, how happy is it, De Vitry, to have a constant heart! How dreadful it must be to see one we love change toward us without cause. It is that which makes me pity Lorenzo so much, for it is plain he loves her still."

"We must have that away," said her husband; "he must be reasoned with, amused, engaged in

some new pursuit, my Blanche. I will do my best, and you must help me. Look there! upon my life 'tis he. Those are mounted men coming down the hill; but they are bringing thunder with them, and if they do not ride faster the storm will catch them ere they reach us. Do you not see those clouds rising above the trees, looking as hard as iron and as gray as lead. By my faith! dear lass, you have never seen a storm in the valley of the Isere, and it is something to see. I have been in many lands, my Blanche, but I never beheld any like it, when the clouds rolled down from the mountains like black smoke, pouring forth a deluge such as no other part of the world has ever been soaked with since the days of Noah. In less than half an hour you will see the valley a lake, and the bridge quite covered. Your little heart will rejoice to think that the castle is built upon a hill, for I never saw the water

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come higher than the edge of the vineyard there."

"Does it come as high as that?" exclaimed Blanche, with a look of alarm; "why, how will Lorenzo cross?"

"He will not be able to cross at all unless he make more haste," answered her husband. "Pardieu, I cannot guess what has come to him; he who, for the last eighteen months, has never ridden up hill or down dale at less than a gallop, as if some devil were tempting him to break his own neck or his horse's, is now creeping down the hill as if he were at a funeral or a procession."

By this time De Vitry had risen and gone near the open window. The sun had near an hour to run before its course for the day would be ended. The clouds, as he said, were rapidly and heavily descending the mountains, and the rain could be seen at the distance of three or

four miles sweeping the valley like a black pall. The sun was still shining bright and clear upon the chateau, and the bridge, and the vineyard. But a moment after De Vitry had taken his place, a redder and a fiercer light blazed fitfully across the scene, followed a few moments after by a peal of thunder which seemed to shake the castle to its foundations.

"Oh, come away, De Vitry, come away," cried Blanche Marie; "the lightning might strike you at that open window."

De Vitry turned round his head with a laugh, calling her a little coward, and then resumed his watch again upon the party of horsemen coming down the opposite hill.

"Ay, ride fast," cried the marquis, "or you will not be in time; but what are all the people thinking of? they have lost the way."

As he spoke the party on whom his eyes

were fixed turned from the direct road toward the chateau, and took a smaller path, which, slanting along the hill side, led down the stream.

"Lorenzo is not among them," said De Vitry, abruptly; "he knows the way here as well as I do, my love; but that party of fools will get into a scrape if they do not mind; there is no shelter for ten miles down the river, and the road on the bank will be under water in ten minutes. Ha! they have seen their mistake, and are turning back. Now ride hard, my gallants, and you may reach the bridge yet."

The lightning now flashed nearer, the thunder followed close upon its flaming messenger, the heavy drops of rain began to fall, and poor Blanche Marie, who had much more taste for the beauties than the sublimities of nature, covered her face with her hands, while her heart



beat quick. The next moment she felt a warm and kindly kiss upon her brow, and the voice of De Vitry said—

“Take courage, love, take courage; God is everywhere. In His hand we stand, as much in that fierce blaze and amid that thunder roar, as in the gay saloon with nothing but music near. Do not fear, my Blanche, but remember you will soon have guests to entertain. These gentlemen are coming hither. They have passed the bridge just in time, and five minutes will see them in this hall. I would not have them say that De Vitry's wife is afraid of a little thunder.”

Blanche took her fingers from her eyes, and, looking up with a smile, put De Vitry's great strong hand on her beating heart, and pressed her own delicate hand upon it.

“See, De Vitry,” she said, “just as your hand is stronger than my hand, so is your heart

firmer than my heart. Mine is a very weak one, husband, but I will show no fear before your guests. I will be very brave."

The words were hardly uttered when there came another flash, and Blanche's promised bravery did not prevent her from starting and covering her eyes again; and De Vitry, with a laugh, turned to the window and gazed forth once more.

"By heaven!" he exclaimed, "it is his highness the Duke of Orleans. I heard he was coming down to Valence, but never dreamed of his coming here. It is lucky the castle lies so near the road. But I must down and meet him;" and he hastily quitted the room.

Blanche was left for some time alone to give way to all her terrors at the storm, without any one to laugh at them, for De Vitry took every hospitable care of his royal guest, and spared his young wife the trouble of giving those orders

for the entertainment of the duke and his train which Blanche might have found it difficult to think of in the perturbation of her mind at the time.

As every one knows, the storms on the Isere are frequently as brief as they are fierce; and the one in question was passing away when De Vitry led into the hall the Duke of Orleans, now clothed in fresh and dry garments.

Always courteous and gentle in demeanour, the Duke of Orleans, afterwards Louis XII. of France, applied himself to put his entertainers at their ease. He took Blanche's hand and kissed it, saying, "Your noble husband, dear lady, tells me you expect here to-night your cousin and mine, Lorenzo Visconti. If he come, I shall call it a lucky storm that drove me for shelter to your house, as I have much to say to him; but I fear he cannot reach Vitry to-day.

The sun is well-nigh down, and the waters of the river seem as high as ever."

"The storm, too, seems going directly along his road," said De Vitry, "and if it reached him where I think he must have first felt it, he will know that he cannot cross the bridge to-night, and find shelter amongst the peasants' cottages out beyond the hills there. But I trust your highness will stay over to-morrow, as you wish to see him. He is certain to be here, I think, early in the morning."

"I must be away before noon," said the duke, "and, in case he should not arrive before I go, you must tell him from me, De Vitry, that I have the king's permission to call any noble gentlemen to my aid who are willing to draw the sword for the recovery of my heritage of Milan. Now I think a Visconti would rather see a child of a Visconti in the ducal chair of Milan than any other. Thus I fully count upon

his aid toward the end of autumn, with all the men that we can raise. So tell him from me, De Vitry."

"You may count surely, my lord the duke, upon Lorenzo's going to any place where there is a chance of his losing his life," said De Vitry. "He is in a curious mood just now."

"I have remarked it," replied the duke. "He used to be gentle, courteous, gay, bright, and brave as his sword, but when last I saw him he had grown stern and somewhat haughty, careless of courtesies, and curt and sharp of speech. They said that some disappointment weighed upon his mind."

"The most bitter, your highness, that can press down the heart of man or woman," answered Blanche Marie; "no less than the faithlessness of one he loved. She is my cousin, yet I cannot but blame her for breaking so noble a heart. They parted with the fondest hopes.

She promised to wait his coming in Florence, where they were to be united immediately. When he arrived there she was gone, without leaving letter or message, or announcement of any kind. He could not follow her to Rome, from the state of the country; and though he wrote, and took every means to make her know where he was, his letters remained unanswered, or were sent back. He might have doubted some foul play; but a few words in her own hand, written carelessly on a scrap of paper, in a packet returned to him, showed too well that she was cognizant of all that had been done; and the last news was that she was married, or to be married to another."

"Then let him marry another too," said the Duke of Orleans; but the conversation was here cut short by the announcement that supper was spread in the hall below, and the duke's noble followers assembled there.

## CHAPTER IV.

LORENZO VISCONTI rode along but slenderly accompanied. A few attendants and one or two pack-horses formed all the train which followed him. A carelessness had come over him, not only of all display, but of life and all things that life could give. He rode, as De Vitry had described, at headlong speed. It seemed as if he were flying from something—perhaps from bitterly-contrasted memories; but, as ever, black care sat behind the horseman, and no furious riding could shake him off. His eyes were fixed upon the ground, but he saw not loose

stone or slippery rock, and never marked the heavy clouds which, having ravaged the valley of the Isere, were now rising over the hills upon his left, and threatening to pour down their fury upon him.

Grave and, for him, strangely sad, Antonio was following close behind him, watching with eager anxiety the obstructions in his master's way, and marking also the coming tempest. "Mý lord," he said, at length, with a somewhat hesitating voice, "were it not better to seek some shelter and to ride more slowly?"

"Why?" asked Lorenzo; "the road is good."

"Because, my lord," replied the man, "if we do not seek some shelter we shall be half drowned in ten minutes, and if we ride so hard, though you may go safe, we worse mounted men will break both our necks and our horses' knees, as soon as the sun sets, which will be in a quarter of an hour."



Lorenzo drew in his rein; but the only word he spoke was "Well."

"We just passed a handsome chateau, my lord," urged Antonio, "and I am sure they will give you ready welcome there, if you like to rest there for the night."

"Whose chateau is it?" inquired his lord, with no great signs of interest.

"Is it that of Madame de Chaumont," replied Antonio. "Do you not remember her and her beautiful daughter at the court last year? They were very fond of your society, and will gladly receive you, I will warrant."

"Yes, she is very beautiful," said Lorenzo, carelessly, "but light as vanity: what woman is not? But I cannot stay to-night, my good Antonio. My cousin and her husband expect me, and I must on."

"But you will never be able to pass the Isere, my lord," said Antonio; "that cloud has left

half its burden there, depend upon it. Do you not remember how the river rises in an hour? I will wager a crown to a coronet there is ten feet of water on the bridge by this time. But here come the drops, and we shall have water and fire too enough before we have done. I have a hideous cold, my lord, and cold bathing is not good for me."

Lorenzo turned towards him with a cynical smile; but, before he could reply, there was a gay, ringing laugh came up from the gorge into which they were just descending, and two ladies followed by several servants, some with falcons on their hands, some carrying dead game across their saddles, came cantering up. They glanced towards Lorenzo as they approached, and, at first did not seem to recognise him; but the next moment the younger exclaimed, "Dear mother, it is the young Seigneur Visconti. Give you good day, my lord—give you good day. We cannot

stay to greet you; but turn your horse and ride back with us, for the roof of our chateau is a better covering for your head than yonder black cloud. Mother, make him come."

Lorenzo carelessly turned his horse as the gay and beautiful girl spoke, and a few words of common courtesy passed between him and the Marquise de Chaumont. But Eloise de Chaumont would have her part in the conversation, and she exclaimed, "Come, Seigneur Visconti, put spurs to your steed and show your horsemanship. I am going home at full gallop, otherwise the plumes in my beaver will be as dragged as those of the poor heron that my bird struck in the river. The haggard kite would not wait for him to tower. On! on! I will bet you my last embroidered hawking-glove against an old gauntlet that my jennet reaches the castle first." Thus saying, she applied the whip somewhat unmercifully to her horse, and Lorenzo put spurs to his.

The race was not very equal, for Lorenzo's hackney was tired with a long journey and hard riding; but still the young knight kept up side by side with his fair companion till they came to a narrow pass between a high cliff and a deep dell, where Lorenzo somewhat drew in the rein to leave the lady better room.

"Ay," she exclaimed, "I shall beat you. See, your horse is out of breath. Spur up, spur up, or the day is mine."

Whether Lorenzo did imprudently use the spur, or that the horse shied at something on the way, I do not know, but in trying to regain his place by the lady's side the hackney (as lighter horses were then called) swerved from the centre of the road and trod upon the loose stones at the side. They gave way beneath his feet and went rattling down into the glen, while the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled around. The gallant beast made a strong effort to recover his

footing, but it was in vain; the ground yielded beneath his hoofs, and he fell down the slope, rolling over his master as he went.

“Jesu Maria!” cried Eloise de Chaumont, with a scream, “I have killed him.”

That he was killed seemed for several minutes true, for he lay without sense or motion. Antonio and several of the servants scrambled down and raised the young lord's head, but he lay senseless still. Eloise had bounded from her jennet and stood wringing her hands upon the brink, and even Madame de Chaumont staid for several minutes gazing down; but at length the rain became too heavy for her patience, and she said, “We can do no good here, Eloise. Let them carry him up to the chateau. We shall only get cold and spoil all our housings. Mark, look to that bird: its hood is all awry. Come, my child, come;” and, without waiting for reply, she rode on.

Eloise remained, however, not doing much good, it is true, but at least showing sympathy; and at length Lorenzo was raised, and with difficulty brought up to the road again. A deep groan as they carried him told that life was not yet extinct, and the rain falling in his face revived him as three of the servants carried him in their arms towards the chateau. When he opened his eyes Eloise de Chaumont was walking by his side, weeping, and, as soon as memory of all that had occurred came back, he said, with a great effort, "I am not much hurt, I believe. Do not grieve, dear lady."

"Oh you are—you are, Lorenzo," she cried, "and I did it, foolish, wicked girl that I am. But do not speak. We shall soon be at the chateau. Ride, Guillaume, ride to the priest of St. Servan—he knows all about chirurgy—bid him come up at all speed, Give the jennet to Jean Graille. Ride on, I say, and be quick.

Oh, Seigneur Visconti, I am so sorry for my folly."

In a few minutes Lorenzo was borne into the chateau, and carried to a chamber, where stretched upon a bed, he waited the arrival of the priest. But Eloise de Chaumont would not leave him, notwithstanding several messages from her mother. With her own hands she wiped the earth from his brow; with her own hand she gave him water to drink, and more than ever she called him Lorenzo, bringing back to the young lord's mind a suspicion which he had once entertained, but speedily dismissed as a vain fancy, that Eloise de Chaumont viewed him with more favour than most others at a court where she was universally sought and admired.

It skills not to dwell upon the tedious process of a long sickness and a slow recovery. Madame de Chaumont, a lady of a light and selfish character, though not fond of witnessing suf-

fering, visited Lorenzo religiously once every day. Eloise de Chaumont, never accustomed to restraint in anything, was in his chamber morning, noon, and night. In his sickness she regarded him as a pet bird, or a favourite horse; and, to say sooth, it would seem there were other feelings too, for one time when he was sleeping he was wakened by the touch of her lips upon his brow. Guests came and went at the chateau, but their presence made no change in her conduct. When Mademoiselle de Chaumont was asked for, the reply was, usually, "She is in the Seigneur de Visconti's chamber;" and people began to wonder and to talk.

The circles made on the clear bosom of the waters by a pebble cast into them differ in this from those produced by the spread of rumour: in the one case they become more and more faint in proportion to their distance from the



centre; in the other, they are not only extended, but deepened. The gossip of the neighbouring chateaux spread to the neighbouring towns, thence to wider circles still. They reached the chateau of De Vitry, and they reached the court, and many a circumstance was added which had never existed. Blanche Marie and De Vitry rejoiced, for they hoped that the tendance of Eloise de Chaumont might not only aid to cure Lorenzo from mere physical evils, but to apply still more efficacious remedies to his mind. She was young, she was beautiful, she was wealthy, the only child left by one of the first nobles in the land; and there seemed all the frankness and freedom of innocence about her, with a kindly heart, and a mind which was brilliant, if not strong. They rode over together to see their young cousin, and Blanche Marie was charmed with all she saw. She knew not how dangerous it is to give way

to impulses where feelings are not backed by principles. She thought Eloise one provided by Heaven to wean Lorenzo from the memory of another more dear, whom she believed to be unworthy of him.

At the court of the King of France—the lawful guardian of the young heiress—the rumours of what was taking place at Chaumont produced some agitation. Eloise was a special favorite of sweet Anne of Brittany, and the queen was vexed and alarmed. Men are not so easily affected by scandal as women, and the king laughed at what had grieved his wife. “My life for it,” he said, “this matter will be easily explained. My young cousin Lorenzo is not one to peril a lady’s reputation, and if he has done so he must make reparation. We will send for him, however, my dear lady.”

When the king’s letter arrived, requiring in kindly terms Lorenzo’s presence at Amboise,

that young nobleman, though able to rise from his bed, was by no means sufficiently recovered to take a long journey, or even to mount his horse. He assured the king in his reply, however, that the moment he could ride he would set out on the journey; and, to tell the truth, he longed not a little to leave the castle at Chaumont. He himself felt that his residence there was becoming somewhat dangerous to him. The memory of Leonora could not be banished from his mind. Disappointment, indignation, and even a certain feeling of contempt, which the indifference he believed her to have shown had generated, could not extinguish entirely that first-born, fairy love, which, once it has possession of the heart, rarely goes out entirely. But yet Eloise de Chaumont was, as the poet says, "beautiful exceedingly"—of a very different character from Leonora, more fair, more laughing, with less soul in the look, less depth

and intensity of mind in the eyes, but still very beautiful. A sort of intimacy too, of a nature difficult to describe, had sprung up during her long attendance upon him; they called each other by their Christian names, and, although no word of love had ever passed between them, it was evident to every one around that Eloise knowing that her loveliness and wealth gave her the choice of almost any man in France, looked upon Lorenzo as her own, and would have been as much surprised as grieved to think there was a doubt of her becoming his wife.

Lorenzo, for his part, could not but be grateful, could not but admire. One thing, however, proved that he did not love—he saw in her many faults. He wished she was not so light, so frivolous. He wished he could see some indications of firm character and steadfast principles. “And yet,” he thought, “where I be-

lieved they most existed they were the most wanting. What matters it to me whom I wed now? If Eloise can love me, that amounts to the utmost sum of happiness I can now hope for."

Nevertheless, when, at the end of another fortnight, he mounted his horse to proceed to Amboise, not a word had passed to bind him to her who had nursed him so kindly.

"When will you be back, Lorenzo?" asked Eloise, as she gave him her cheek to kiss at parting.

"I know not what the king wishes," replied Lorenzo, "or how long he may detain me—not long, I hope."

Those words bound him to nothing in the common eye of the world; but, as he pondered them while riding on his way, he felt that they implied a promise to return as soon as the king left him free to do so. And yet he hesitated,

and yet he doubted, and yet he asked himself  
"Can she make my happiness, or can I make  
hers?"

"It is well to be off with the old love  
Before we are on with the new,"

says an old song, and Lorenzo had reason to  
regret that he did not apply the maxim it con-  
tains to his own heart.

After traversing one half of France, and at  
Blois increasing his retinue by a number of his  
servants from Paris, he rode on to fair Amboise,  
where the king was then engaged in erecting  
those splendid buildings which since his day  
have been the scene of so many tragical events.  
He arrived at the castle early in the morning,  
and was immediately admitted to Charles's pre-  
sence. The monarch received him kindly,  
saying,

"So, my good cousin, you have come at

length; your illness must have been severe and tedious. What was its nature?"

"Some broken bones, may it please your majesty, and a body all bruised and shaken by my horse falling down a hill and rolling over me," replied Lorenzo.

"By my faith! it does not please my majesty at all," said the king, laughing. "Odds life! dear Lorenzo, if your horse had served you so at Fornovo, I should have been at the tender mercies of the Venetians, most likely. But they tell me you found consolation in a fair lady's society, and had plenty of it."

"Mademoiselle de Chaumont attended me most kindly, and gave me as much of her time as she could spare," replied Lorenzo, gravely.

"She gave you a little of her reputation too, I am told," answered the king, "and this is a subject on which I must speak to you seriously,

my cousin. You are perhaps not aware that idle and malicious tongues have been busy with your name and that of Eloise de Chaumont. They say that she would pass more than one half the night in your chamber."

The angry blood rushed up into Lorenzo's face, but he answered at first scoffingly. "If she did, sire, it must have been when I was insensible to the honor," said Lorenzo; but he added, in a sterner tone, "in short, my lord the king, he who said so is a liar, and I will prove it on his body with my lance."

"There is an easier manner to clear the young lady's reputation," replied Charles, "for cleared, of course, it must be. She is a ward of the crown. Her father was one of our best subjects and most faithful friends, and your own station and fortune, as well as our affection for you, render you, of all others, the man on whom we should wish to bestow her hand. But, my



dear cousin," he continued, in a lighter tone, "there was, if I remember right, a fair lady in Italy whose knight you were when we were there?"

Lorenzo winced as if a serpent had stung him.

"She is nothing to me, my lord, nor I to her," he said; "her own will has severed every bond between us."

"Then there is no impediment," said the king, "to your marriage to Mademoiselle de Chaumont?"

"None whatever that I know of, sire," replied Lorenzo.

"And you promise me, whatever may happen to myself," said Charles, "that you will heal this little scandal, produced by her great kindness to yourself, by making her your wife as speedily as may be?"

"If she will accept my hand," replied Lo-

renzo, "of which as yet I know nothing; for no one word of love has ever passed between us; but God forbid that any evil chance should befall your majesty, as your words seem to anticipate."

"Who can tell?" said the king in a gloomy tone. "Of four children my dear Anne has given me, not one remains alive; they have perished in their beauty and their bloom. Why should I not perish with them? This world is full of accidents and dangers, and we walk continually within the shadow of death. My thoughts have been very gloomy lately, my good cousin," and he laid his hand affectionately on Lorenzo's shoulder; "and yet what matters it," he continued, "whether it be to day, to-morrow, or the next day? Stretch life out as long as we can, it is but a span at last. However, it is well, in this uncertainty of being, to delay not one hour any thing that may be ruined by delay."

I will have the royal consent to your marriage with the ward of the crown drawn out this morning. Come to me towards the hour of three, and it shall be ready for you. The queen will then receive you more graciously, when I have told her all, than she might do now."

When Lorenzo returned at the hour appointed, he was conducted into that beautiful hall still to be seen at Amboise, where he found the king, the queen, and several attendants, apparently ready to go forth. Anne of Brittany did receive him most graciously; and Charles handed him the paper authorizing his immediate marriage with Eloise de Chaumont.

"We shall but give you time to bait your horses, Seigneur Visconti," said the Queen of France, "and then send you back to your fair bride. No stain must rest upon a lady's reputation long; and though this be but the work of evil tongues, without a shadow of foundation for

the scandal, the sooner they are silenced the better. We are now going out by the old postern into the fosse to see a game of tennis played, in which, perchance, my lord may take part. We invite you to go with us, that all the world may see we give no credit to these wild rumours."

One of the chamberlains hastened to open the door of the hall, and the royal party passed out, followed by Lorenzo and the attendants. They took their way through the great marble hall below, and through a long, narrow corridor or passage in the thick wall of the castle. It was terminated by a low-browed, stone archway, with an oaken door, in passing through which Charles, miscalculating its height, struck his head violently against the arch, and would have fallen had he not been caught by Lorenzo, who came close behind.

For a moment or two the king seemed con-

fused and almost stunned; but the accident he had met with was so commonplace and apparently insignificant that nobody took much notice of it. The ladies who followed the queen were inclined to smile, and Charles himself treated it more lightly than any one. He pressed his hand, it is true, once or twice upon the top of his head, and took off his bonnet for the cool air, but he declared it was "nothing—a mere nothing."

A paleness had spread over the young monarch's face, however, which Lorenzo Visconti did not like; but the royal party were soon in the dry deep fosse, and the memorable *jeu de paume* began.

Charles prided himself upon his skill in all manly exercises, and after looking on for a time he took a racket, and joined in the game. He was, or he was suffered to appear, the best player present; but after he had played one score he

gave up the racket, and withdrew from the game, remaining for a short while as a spectator; and Lorenzo remarked that, as the king stood looking 'on, he twice pressed his hand upon his heart. At length he turned to the queen, and the rest of the party who had accompanied him thither, and proposed to return into the castle, adding a few words to Lorenzo on his approaching marriage. The young nobleman walked nearly by his side, but a little behind, and all passed the postern, and entered the narrow gallery or corridor, still talking. When they had nearly reached a flight of steps which led to the halls above, the king turned suddenly towards Lorenzo, saying, "Remember," and then fell at once upon the pavement.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed. Some of the attendants raised the monarch to carry him up the stairs, but the chief chamberlain forbade them to move him till a physician

should be called. Some cushions were brought to support his head, and speedily a number of fresh faces crowded the passage; but the king remained without consciousness. Some broken words fell from his lips, but no one could discover what they meant, and, after a short struggle with death, Charles VIII. passed away, beloved and mourned rather than respected.

## CHAPTER V.

AGAIN let us change the scene. There is another whose course we must trace, from the fatal, the terrible moment when she parted from Lorenzo Visconti in Tuscany, to the death of Charles VIII. Ere, we do so, however, it may be needful to notice a small incident which affected greatly her fate, without appearing to be in a direct manner connected with it.

In a magnificent room in one of those grand buildings, half palace, half fortress, with which Rome in those days abounded, sat Cæsar Borgia



and Ramiro d'Orco, on the very day on which Charles VIII. began his march from Lombardy to France. The cheek of Ramiro was less pale than usual, and there was a slight gathering together of the eyebrows, not to say a frown, which in an ordinary man might have signified very little, but in one who had so strong an habitual command over his features and over his emotions would indicate to those who knew him well, an unusual degree of excitement. His voice was calm however, his tone courteous, and from time to time a quiet smile belied the aspect of his brow.

"My lord," he said, "I must have some security. Not that I doubt your eminence in the least. Heaven forbid! But all wise men like to have some guarantee for anything that is promised to them, and are always willing to give guarantees for that which they really intend to perform."

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"I swear by my soul and my salvation," answered Borgia, "that if you will aid me in this matter—aid me in its consummation—I will molest her in no shape. She shall be to me as sacred as a nun."

"I am sure your lordship is sincere," replied Ramiro, "but if oaths were to be accepted at all, I would prefer that you swore in something you believe in, rather than by your soul and your salvation. Then as to your looking upon her as sacred as a nun, I have never heard that you regarded nuns as sacred at all. It is better we should understand each other clearly. I find, during your pleasure tour in Tuscany, you entered the Villa Morelli, had very nearly caught and carried her off, had she not been somewhat too light of foot for your gentlemen-in-armour, and that you then set fire to the villa in order to 'smoke her out,' as you expressed yourself. I have all the information, my lord

and although you are pleased to pass the matter off as a wild caprice to gratify your soldiery with a few fair captives, without any cognizance of her being in the villa, yet the answers to the inquiries you caused to be made at Florence should have satisfied that she could be nowhere else. Now I believe I can aid you to the very men you want; and, as you are somewhat impatient, can do it without delay; but I must in the first place, have some strong place put in my possession, where my daughter can be more safe than she was in the Villa Morelli, until such time as her lover becomes her husband, and she leaves Italy for a somewhat quieter land."

Cæsar Borgia laughed low and quietly.

"Now what a strange thing is this that men call morality and virtue!" he exclaimed, with a bitter sneer. "Not the chameleon changes colour more frequently, and more completely according to the things around. But we have

no time for philosophical reflections, my dear Ramiro Tell me, are these men near at hand?"

"They are here in Rome," replied Ramiro d'Orco. "In fact, my lord, being a man of no great wealth and no power, I judged it expedient in coming here in order to seek for both, to gather round me at times serviceable men from various states of Italy, who might supply me with a kind of authority tantamount to that which I did not possess. Your eminence's people, it seems, fail you at this step, although God wot, I should have thought they had few scruples left by this time. I am willing to aid you with mine, provided you insure me against some little frailties of your eminence, which might lead to things displeasing to me."

"Well, well, send the men to me," said Cæsar Borgia; "it shall be done."

"It must be done before they come here, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco.

A flush passed over the young cardinal's countenance; but he said, starting up suddenly—

"Well, wait here till I return. I must get the donation from his holiness."

"Remember, I must have all rights and privileges—of high and low justice—of war and of defence, with only reservation of homage of the Holy See. I know not what it is exactly that your eminence requires these men to do; but they have strong stomachs, and are not likely to be nauseated by trifles."

"I doubt not they are by no means dainty," replied Borgia, and he left the room.

Ramiro d'Orco remained alone for more than an hour, during which he hardly moved his position. One sentence did escape his lips just

after Cæsar Borgia left him. "This man is angry," he said, "and his anger is dangerous." What he thought afterward I know not; probably it was of self-preservation, for he drew his dagger, and looked all along the blade, examining most carefully a small groove which extended from the hilt to the point, then sheathed it again, and seemed to fall into quiet meditation.

At length, when it was well-nigh dark, the door opened again, and the cardinal re-entered with a parchment in his hand. His face was now all placid and benign, and, advancing toward Ramiro, he said, "I have been long, my friend; but if you knew how much I have had to do in one short hour, you would say I had been expeditious. There—that paper gives you Imola and its dependencies, with all the rights and privileges you require. It took me one half the time to persuade his holiness to grant

it. Had he known to what it tended, he would have cut off his right hand ere he signed it."

"I thank your eminence sincerely," replied Ramiro, taking the parchment; "mutual benefits bind men together. They must never be all on one side. Either I miscalculate my own powers, or you shall have the worth of this gift in a few hours in services of the most acceptable kind. Now let us know what you want done."

"I want a man removed from my path," said Borgia, abruptly; "one whose shadow is too tall for me—who stands between me and the sun."

"That is easily done, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco; "there is such a river as the Tiber, and men will fall in at times, especially when they are either drunk or badly wounded."

"You catch my meaning readily," replied Borgia. "It were done easily, as you say, Ramiro, were this a common case, but there are men upon whom vulgar assassins would fear to try their steel."

"They must have faint hearts or poor brains," replied Ramiro. "A man is but a man, and a fisherman's life is as good to him as a cardinal's. It is as valuable, too, in the eye of the law; and he who can conceal one deed can conceal another. May I know at what quarry you wish me to let loose the hounds?"

Cæsar Borgia rose, and walked slowly up and down the room. There was something that moved him—that troubled him. What could it be? Remorse? No, he knew no remorse nor pity. The human heart will sometimes, in its dark recesses, conceive things so horrible, that, though it will retain and nourish them as its



most cherished offspring, it will dread that any other eye should see them, and long to build around them, like the Cretan queen, a dark and intricate edifice, to hide them for ever from man's sight. It might be this that moved him. He had need of aid; he had need of instruments; he was obliged to speak that which he fain would have had done but never uttered. His beautiful countenance was overshadowed by the expression of a demon—not a triumphant, but a suffering demon; his eyes were fixed upon vacancy, and his broad, tall forehead was covered with a cold dew. At length he seated himself again close to Ramiro d'Orco, and in a voice low but distinct, said—

“My friend, whoever will attain great power must not suffer impediments to be in his way. He must remove them, Ramiro. Nor must one prejudice of man, one canting maxim of priests—not even of those habitual weaknesses which

are implanted in us during childhood, and reared and nourished by women and servants, remain to stumble at. Who, think you, has most kept me from the light since I was born? Who, without striving, has won all the prizes in the games of life, and left me nothing but the fragrance of his banquet?"

It was nearly dark, and they could hardly see each other's faces, so that the paleness which spread over Ramiro d'Orco's face escaped the eyes of his companion. Ramiro answered nothing, and Borgia went on.

"When this mighty city was founded, two brothers, equal in power, laid it out and planned it. One was feeble as compared with the other, and the stronger mind soon saw that there was not room for two. Had Remus lived, what had Rome been now? A village in a marsh. But his great and glorious brother knew well what course to take in founding a new dominion, and

he took it. Nor is such conduct uncommon nowadays with those who have strong hearts and seek great objects. Look at that mighty people whom we poor fools fear and call infidels. Have we ever seen, since the days of Rome's greatest glory, a more powerful, energetic, conquering race than the Saracens? Does the sultan, or caliph, or whatever he may be, suffer his power to be shaken, or his course to be impeded by a weak horde of brothers? No, no. He sends out of the troubles of life those who are not gifted for life's mighty contests. Why, this man Bajazet has paid three hundred thousand ducats for the dead body of his brother Zizim, lest perchance he should some day trouble his repose. Shall I be more scrupulous when the Duke of Gandia builds up a wall between me and my right course? No, Ramiro, no! I am about to cast off these priestly robes, that only trammel me, to pursue the path which

nature by a mistake opened to him; to strive in arms and policy for the great designs of ambition; and I would have the course cleared before me. Do you understand me now, Ramiro?"

"I think I do, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco; but Borgia went on without attending to him.

"A mistake of nature, did I say? a blunder—a gross blunder. Had I had Gandia's opportunities, should I have neglected them as he has done? What should I have been now? What would my friends have been? This miserable cardinalate, what does it give me? Not enough to reward a horse-boy. Give me but room, and I will make sure to carve me a principality out of this land which will enable me to raise my name on high, and recompense all who serve me. I will so work the dissensions of these states, that if I bring them all not under my heel, I will bind a

sufficient number in a fasces to render my power unassailable. But I must have room, Ramiro, I must have room; and I must have it quickly. Between this hour and my father's death, who can say what time will be allowed me? Yet all must be done within that space; and if I pause and hesitate at the first step, the precious moment will have slipped by. Gandia must die, my friend. He bars my way, he extinguishes my light. An accident made him my elder brother; we must have some accident which shall leave me without one. Now, then, you know all. Can you help me? How can you help me?"

"I am too old to help you with my own hand, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco, "but I have those who can and will. You need not explain aught to them. You need never name the man, but merely designate him by outward signs. You know his haunts—his habits. Let them watch for him in some convenient place, and treat him as

they would some gay gallant who has raised the jealousy of some noble husband."

"But it must be done quickly, Ramiro," replied the other. "In a few days I must quit Rome for Naples, and I would have it finished before I go."

"That is easy too," replied Ramiro d'Orco. "You must learn where he may be found. Give them but the hour and place, and they will spare you all future trouble."

Cæsar Borgia did not seem altogether satisfied. He sat silent, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, gnawing his lower lip; and, after a moment's pause, passed apparently in intense thought, Ramiro added,

"There is but one way, my lord, in which this thing can be done properly and well. You shall see the men yourself; you can be either incognito or not, as you please: but deal with them separately. Four will be enough, for I know that

each man I send you is equal to a dozen common cut-throats. You have but to tell me where and when they shall come to you, and I will have them there, one by one, with a quarter of an hour between their visits."

"You are, indeed, a good deviser, my friend Ramiro," replied Borgia, with a well-pleased look. "No witness to my conversation with either. They can meet and arrange their plans afterward, but that commits not me. As to incognito it is hardly possible and hardly needful. My face is too well known in Rome, and my word better than any single bravo's."

"When shall I send them, my lord?" asked Ramiro d'Orco.

"This night—this very night," answered Borgia, eagerly; "no time is to be lost. Such things should be hardly thought of ere they be executed. The deed should tread upon the heels of the termination."

"And here?" asked Ramiro.

"Ay, even here," replied Borgia. "Strange people come here, sometime, my Ramiro."

"Then I hasten to fulfil your lordship's will," replied his companion. "Lay not your finger on my household gods, and you will find no one to serve you better. I have already given you some proof of it by throwing such nets around my good cousin, the Cardinal Julian, that all his enmity toward your father has proved impotent as yet. In this matter you shall find that I can be serviceable too."

"As to your household gods or goddesses, dear Ramiro," replied Borgia, with a light laugh, "be under no fear. I was a fool about that business of the villa. I knew not that you would take the thing so much to heart, for I am too wise to risk the loss of a strong friend for a light love. You told me just now to swear by something I believed in. I swear by my ambition, Ramiro, that I will



never seek your daughter, or trouble her again. May fortune never favour me if I do! You will believe that oath, Ramiro?"

"It is the most binding your eminence could take," replied d'Orco, drily; "and now I take my leave, for I believe with you that if this is to be done at all, it should be done at once. Yet one word more; as you seek no incognito, I will send you a man who knows you already, and whom you know. He is better and more trusty than one of those I thought of. He has been bred in a rare school for such operations. Buondoni of Milan was his tutor, and Ludovic the Moor the regent of the university where he studied."

"Ah! who is he?" asked Borgia, with a smile. "He should be a great professor if he have any genius."

"Oh, he is a ripe scholar, and a man of much ability," answered Ramiro. "He knows the course of the jugular vein, and the exact posi-

tion of the heart, as if he were an anatomist. This is no other than our good friend Friar Peter. He may come to you to-night without his robes on, but you will find Pierre Mardocchi as good a devil as any friar of them all. But we waste time, and again I take my leave."

What were the feelings of Ramiro d'Orco as he left the Borgia palace would be difficult to say. He was a man of few scruples, and hardened in that worst of all philosophies, which some even in our own day are so eager to teach, the main axiom of which is, that all men are equally bad, and bold crime is superior to timid vice by the great element of courage. It is hardly possible for a misanthropist to be anything but a villain. And yet, although he would not have shrunk from any ordinary crime, there was something in the calm determination of Borgia to murder his own brother—ay, and even in the arguments he had used to

palliate, if not justify the act, which had sent the blood back from his cheek and from his lips, and it seemed to stagnate for a moment.

But short consideration was needed to show him that there was but one course left for him to pursue with any chance of safety. The dangerous confidence which Cæsar Borgia had placed in him did not admit of any choice but between death and crime. He must be an accomplice or he must be an enemy; and to be Cæsar Borgia's enemy, for any man unarmoured in mighty power, was to stand upon the brink of the grave. All remorse, all hesitation, therefore, were quickly done away. "I must serve him well," he thought—"must help him to accomplish the deed—must teach him he cannot do without me. Then his own interest will make him my friend in acts, if not in heart."

Not three quarters of an hour had passed ere a friar presented himself at the Borgia palace. He staid some twenty minutes, and ere he left another man was admitted to the cardinal—a man of swaggering military air, who had lost one eye, apparently in fight. These two came forth together, crossed over to the other side of the street, and stood there conversing for some time under an archway. During the next half hour, two others, each of whom had previously visited the Borgia palace, were added to the group, and it must be admitted that four more consummate scoundrels have seldom been gathered together.

On the following night there was a great entertainment at the house of Rosa Vanozza, the mother of the Borgias, the concubine of the Pope. Guest after guest departed, some with lights to guide their steps, some apparently not so willing that the course they took should be

marked. There was a servant, richly dressed, who stood in the square opposite the house, who scanned every group as it came out, and at the farther corner of the square were three or four men, discussing, it would seem, some knotty point with Italian vehemence of gesture.

Though apparently indifferent to everything but their own conversation, the eyes of these men also ran over each group that came from the Casa Vanozza. All passed by, however without their moving; the lights wound away through the narrow streets, and all became darkness in the square. The men then moved on towards the servant, who still remained where he had been stationed before, as if intending to pass him; but just at the moment they were doing so, he staggered some paces with a groan, and fell upon the pavement. The men returned to the spot where they had been previously standing.

A few minutes after, two gay-looking young cavaliers came forth from Vanozza's house, and walked partly across the square together at some distance from where the dead man lay. One of them looked round, saying, "Where can my valet be? The dog has grown weary of waiting, I suppose. Have you no servants with you, Cæsar?"

"No," replied the other, "I have no fear of walking the streets of Rome alone—I am so beloved, you know, Gandia," and he added a short bitter sort of a laugh.

"Well, I take this street to the right," said the Duke of Gandia. "I have some business down near San Jacomo."

"Good night," said the other. "I know where you are going, Gandia. You can't cheat me."

"Good-night, cardinal," replied the duke, laughing, and they parted.

The same night, a few hours afterward, a boatman upon the Tiber, watching a load of wood which he had landed near the church of St. Jerome, and lying apparently asleep in his boat, saw two men come forth from the narrow alley which ran by the side of the church, and look cautiously all round, up one street and down another, as if to insure that all were free from passengers. Everything was still about the city—no step was heard, no moving object seen—and the two men returned to the alley whence they had issued forth.

Shortly after, four men appeared at the mouth of the alley, one of whom was on horseback, and all approached at a quick pace toward a spot on the banks of the Tiber not more than ten yards from the boat in which the man was watching. When they came near he perceived that the horseman had the corpse of a dead man behind him, flung carelessly over the crupper,

with the head and arms hanging over on one side, and the feet and legs on the other. When near the river, the horseman wheeled his horse and backed it to the brink. His companions then took the body from behind him, swung it to and fro several times to give it greater impetus, and then cast it as far as they could into the Tiber. The horseman then turned and gazed upon the shining surface of the river, upon which the moon was now pouring a flood of light.

"What is that black thing floating there?" he asked.

"It is his cloak," replied one of the others.

"Cast some stones upon it quick," said the horseman. His orders were obeyed, and the cloak disappeared.

When the boatman, many days afterward, told his story, upon being questioned as to whether he had seen anything particular on the



fatal Wednesday night, he was asked with some surprise why he had not given information at once. He answered that within the last few years he had seen more than a hundred dead thrown into the Tiber, and had never considered it any business of his.

On the following day Rome was startled with the intelligence that the Duke of Gandia, the Pope's eldest son—the only one, indeed, who possessed in any degree the love or respect of the people—was missing; and sinister rumours spread around.

But there was one man within the gates of Rome who knew the whole on the Wednesday night. Cæsar Borgia went not to bed when he returned from his mother's entertainment; but, dismissing all his train to rest, he waited for news of the events which he was well aware were to happen. I might give a fanciful picture of the agitation of his mind—of the listening ear

and the straining eye, and the pallid cheek, and the quivering lip—and it might have every appearance of verisimilitude; for at that moment a brother was being murdered by his order. But it was not so. He sat upon velvet cushions, playing with a small, silky-haired monkey. He seemed as thoughtless, careless, and sportive as the poor beast itself. For half an hour he amused himself thus. He teased it, he irritated it, and then he soothed it. Again he teased it, and at length the monkey bit him, when, seizing it by the legs, he dashed its head against the floor, and the poor beast lay dead at his feet. He washed the blood from his hand with a handkerchief, and stood gazing at the dead brute with a face that betokened no grief or regret. At length he kicked the body into a corner, murmuring. “People must not bite me.”

People! Did he think that monkey was his brother?

The only time when he showed some degree of agitation was when more than an hour and a half had elapsed since his return, and yet no tidings arrived. "Can they have failed?" he said, in a low voice; "can they have failed? Oh no, impossible;" and, sitting down again—for he had risen while the momentary fear crossed his mind—he took up a book and read some love songs of that day. Nearly another hour passed, and then a step was heard upon the staircase. The next instant a friar entered the room, and silently closed the door behind him.

"It is done, your eminence," said the man, approaching Borgia, and speaking low and quietly.

"What have you done with the body?" asked the cardinal.

"It is at the bottom of the Tiber," replied Mardocchi. "I am somewhat late, for we had to drag him into Michelotto's house, near St.

Jerome's, and we did not like to carry him to the river bank as long as a single soul could be seen moving in the streets."

"Right—right," said Cæsar Borgia; "that might have been ruinous."

"Not an eye saw," said Mardocchi, "though he fought for a minute or two: for Michelotto missed his first blow, and it took nine wounds to dispatch him. Some one must have given him three. I only gave him two, but they were good ones. One was between the throat and the breast-bone; the other, which was the best, was in the middle of the left side; that brought him down, and he never moved or spoke after that."

"You are a good and faithful fellow," replied Borgia, "and have bound you to me for ever. You shall take away with you to-night the ducats I promised yourself and your companions;

but that ring is for yourself, and engages you in my particular service."

Mardocchi took the ring and held it in his hand, apparently hesitating.

"I beg your eminence to pardon me," he said, at length, "but I cannot quit the Lord Ramiro."

"Ha! do you love the good lord so much?" asked Borgia.

"No, your eminence, I do not love him at all," replied the friar; "but—but—I have an object in staying with him."

"Speak out—speak out, Mardocchi," said Cæsar Borgia; "you have nothing to fear from me, and if I can help you I will."

"It is a long story, my lord," replied the friar; "but to tell you as shortly as may be. The signor's daughter, it seems, is to be married shortly to young Lorenzo Visconti. Now I have

an old grudge against that young man. I have promised not to practise against his life, and I will keep my promise, for I always do; but I have not promised not to do him all the harm I can, for revenge I will have, and I can only have it by staying with Ramiro d'Orco."

"That suits me well," replied Cæsar Borgia. "You shall be my servant, Mardocchi, but not quit the good lord. You may remain with him, go with him where he goes, serve him against all men except me; but you will remember you are mine, and be ready to serve me at a moment's notice. I need such men as you. You will receive a hundred ducats in the year from my treasurer, and I count upon you for any service, even should it be against Ramiro himself."

"I trust I may count upon your eminence's countenance too," said Mardocchi, "in case I should get into any trouble on this Signor Vis-

conti's matters, for my revenge upon him I will have."

"You shall have my protection, and those whom I protect are tolerably safe," said Borgia, rising and going to a small beautiful cabinet that stood in the room. "Here, take this bag of ducats; it is what I promised. Divide them equally with your companions, and say nothing about the ring I have given you. Come to me to-morrow, and we will speak further. I will now retire, and shall sleep better than I have done for weeks."

Mardocchi took the heavy bag, and as he did so, Cæsar Borgia saw that there was blood on the man's hand. It was his brother's blood; and the sight did for an instant touch his obdurate heart, which nothing else had reached. He did not sleep so well that night as he expected.

## CHAPTER VI.

RAMIRO D'ORCO sat in his own splendid room while rumours of the death of the unfortunate Duke of Gandia spread consternation through the city; but he had before him a parchment with a large pendant seal, which gave him the important ecclesiastical fief of Imola, and he thought of little else. The first great step he had ever been able to take in that high road of ambition which he had so long been eager to follow was now taken. He saw before him a long career of greatness, and he calculated that, step by step, as Cæsar Borgia rose, he must rise



with him. He did not over-estimate at all the abilities of that very remarkable man; and it was no wild calculation to presume that, with such abilities, with such courage, with such ambition, and without a scruple, Cæsar Borgia, in that unscrupulous age, must rise to the highest point of power and dignity.

True, the town of Imola had its own lords; true, it was strongly garrisoned; but the barony had been declared forfeited to the Holy See, and the fortifications were too much decayed to withstand a siege. Linked as he was now with Cæsar Borgia, and knowing that his services, especially with the hostile Cardinal of St. Peter's, were necessary to the Holy See, he doubted not that the forces of the Pope, which were soon to be employed against Forli, in the immediate neighbourhood of Imola, would be permitted to place him in possession of the vicariate. He was resolved, however, to make sure of that point

as early as possible, and if not successful in his application, to raise troops himself and endeavour to surprise the place.

The second day after the assassination of the Duke of Gandia, Ramiro d'Orco, with more splendor than he had yet displayed in Rome, presented himself first at the Vatican, and then at the palace of the cardinal. At the Vatican he was refused admittance, and the attendants told him the dreadful sufferings of the father for the loss of his eldest and best-beloved son. They assured him, and assured him truly, that the Pope, shut up in his cabinet, had neither seen any one, nor tasted food of any kind since the death of the duke had been ascertained. At the Borgia palace he was admitted, and he found in the gorgeous saloons a number of the high nobility of Rome, brought thither by the same motive which he himself professed, namely, to condole with the young cardinal upon his

brother's death. With a grave air and a sad look, he advanced slowly toward Borgia, and expressed in graceful and well-chosen terms his regret and horror at the event which had occurred.

The drama was well played on both parts, although, to tell the truth, Cæsar was so much amused at the farce, that, had he not been the most complete master of dissimulation in the world, he must have laughed aloud. He looked grave and sad, however; and when Ramiro, after having staid for some time in the hope that the other visitors would depart, rose to do so himself, Cæsar said to him, in that bland and caressing tone which he knew so well how to use—

“Stay with me, my Ramiro. Your company will give me consolation. You must partake my poor dinner, though, to say truth, I have no stomach for aught.”

One by one the barons departed, and if any one suspected that the cardinal was not so much grieved as he appeared to be, they took care not to express their doubts to any one—no, not to their dearest friends or most trusted confidant. When they were gone, a quiet smile passed over Cæsar Borgia's lips, but neither he nor Ramiro made the slightest allusion to the events of the past.

The cardinal, however, was in the most benign and generous humor. His appetite at dinner showed no signs of decay, nor did he altogether avoid the wine-cup. Ramiro knew that he was necessary to him, and therefore ate and drank with him without fear, although it was not always a very safe proceeding. In the course of the dinner Ramiro alluded to the difficulties he might have in obtaining possession of Imola; but Cæsar cut him short with a kindly smile, saying—

"I have thought of all that, and that will be easily arranged, I trust. My journey to Naples once over—and it will only take ten days—I march against these traitor vicars of the Holy See, and will expel them from the possessions they unjustly retain. The Pope, my friend, does not bestow a fief without putting the recipient in possession of it. The first occupation of his forces under my command will be to establish you safely in your city, trusting that I shall have your aid and good counsel in dealing with the others which I have to reduce. Ramiro," he continued, changing his tone and speaking abruptly, "you have done me vast service, and those who serve me well are sure of my gratitude. You have rendered great services, too, to the Holy See, and can render greater still, for there is only one enemy we have to fear, that fierce Julian. Continue to keep him in check

for my sake, and as long as my father lives you may count upon me as your friend."

"I hope, indeed, to be able to do still more," said Ramiro; "for when my daughter is united to a cousin of the King of France, his companion and his friend, I shall have a mouthpiece at that court which can whisper a word in the king's closet more potent than all that Julian de Rovera can say at the council table."

"Good—good," said Cæsar Borgia; and then they proceeded to discuss many points in regard to their future proceedings, which would not interest the reader. Suffice it to say, a few weeks after this conversation, a strong body of the papal troops appeared before the gates of Imola, and summoned the garrison to surrender. Merely a show of resistance was made; but at the first mention of terms the garrison agreed to capitulate, and before night marched out. On the following morning Cæsar Borgia

pursued his way toward Forli, and Ramiro d'Orco, with a splendid train and a considerable band of armed men, whom he had engaged in Rome, made his public entry into the city. The people, who had suffered some oppression from their late lords, shouted and rejoiced, and all his first acts gave promise of a gentle and paternal rule.

Only two days had passed after he became Lord of Imola, when Father Peter, as he was now called, was summoned to the presence of Ramiro d'Orco, and told to prepare for an immediate journey to Florence.

"I send a noble lady of this place," said the baron, "with twenty men-at-arms and some women servants, to bring my daughter hither; but you, my good Marlocchi, have an especial part to play in this business. You will hand her my letter; tell her, her presence is needful to me, and that the dangers she feared in Rome do

not exist at Imola. You have told me, I think, that you have seen and known the young lord Lorenzo Visconti. He is expected in Florence soon to wed my daughter, and will go at once to the Casa Morelli. You must remain behind after the Signora Leonora has set out, and wait for his coming. When he arrives you must immediately see him, and induce him to come hither. Tell him that I found it expedient for many reasons that Leonora should be with me until he came to claim her hand, but for none more than this: I have certain information that my good cousin, Mona Francesca Morelli, having lost her beauty from the effects of injuries she received some months since, is about immediately to enter the convent of San Miniato. Leonora will then be without protection in Florence, unless she goes with Mona Francesca to the convent, which would not please me, as I fear the influence of the sisters upon her mind. You



will tell Signor Visconti, however, that I am forgetful of no promises, and that I am ready to bestow upon him my child's hand as soon as he arrives at Imola."

"But how long am I to wait for him, noble lord?" asked Mardocchi; "young gentlemen are sometimes fickle, and perchance he may not come as soon as you expect."

A sudden flush passed over Ramiro's face, and his brows contracted; but after a short pause he answered, in his usual tone:

"He is not fickle, my good friend. He will be there within a month after you reach Florence; the ways are all open now, and there is nothing to impede him; but even if, from some accident which we cannot foresee, he should be delayed a fortnight or three weeks longer, I would have you stay for him. Few men, my good Mardocchi, are likely to be fickle with *my* daughter."

He laid an emphasis on the word "my," but yet there was something of paternal pride and tenderness in his tone.

"I should think it would be somewhat dangerous," said the friar with a laugh; "however, I will be ready, my lord, at your command, and will obey you to the tittle."

"Dangerous!" said Ramiro, after the man left him. "But this is nonsense; he dare not slight her."

In some eighteen days time Leonora appeared in Imola, more beautiful, perhaps, than ever, and many of the young nobles of the neighbouring country would willingly have disputed her hand with any one; but Ramiro d'Orco took care to make it known that her heart, with his approbation, had been won by another, whose bride she was soon to be. Toward her he was, perhaps, in some degree, more tender than he had shown himself before, yet there was but little difference

in his manner or his conduct; there was the same indulgence of her slightest wishes; the same grave, almost studied reserve. He told her more as a command than a permission, that she would be united to Lorenzo as soon as he arrived; and Leonora's heart beat high with hope and expectation.

Week passed by after week, and still Lorenzo did not come. One letter arrived from Florence informing Ramiro and his daughter that *Mona Francesca*, deprived of Leonora's society, which had of late been her only solace, had retired from the world even earlier than she had intended; but nothing was heard of *Mardocchi*, though he was known to be a good scribe.

Six weeks—two months passed, and fears of various kinds took possession of Leonora's heart. Ramiro d'Orco said nothing, but he appeared more grave and stern than ever.

At length a carrier passing by *Imola* brought

a letter from Mardocchi. It was merely to ask if he should return. He made no mention of Lorenzo, but he merely laconically remarked that he thought he had staid long enough. Ramiro d'Orco laid the letter before his daughter without remark, but he took advantage of a messenger going to France from Cæsar Borgia to order Mardocchi to return.

And what did Leonora do? A tear or two dropped on the villain's letter. She had no doubt of Lorenzo's constancy. His heart was imaged in her own, and she saw nothing fickle, nothing doubtful there. She thought he must be ill—wounded, perhaps, in some encounter—unable to come or write. But she had heard of the courier's passing too, and she longed to write. There had been something in her father's manner, however, that made her hesitate, and, after long thought she went boldly up to his

private cabinet. He was seated, signing some official papers, but he looked up the moment she entered, saying—

“What is it, Leonora?”

A new spirit had entered into her with her love for Lorenzo Visconti, and she answered no longer with the timidity, nay, with that fear which at one time she felt in speaking to her father.

“Lorenzo must be ill, my father,” she said. “I am told that there is a courier going to France, and I long to write by him. I feel it would be better, wiser, to have no secrets from my father—to let him know my whole heart and all my acts. I, therefore, will not write without your permission.”

“Write—write, my child,” said Ramiro d’Orco, with a more beaming look than usually came upon his countenance. “God grant that this young man’s disease may be more of the

body than the mind. His conduct is strange, but yet I will lose no chance. I cannot write to him, but you may. Woman's love may pardon what man's harder nature must revenge. Perhaps this letter may be explained. God grant it!"

Leonora retired to her chamber and wrote:

"My spirit is very much troubled, dear Lorenzo"—such were the words—"You promised to return in two months after we parted. Five have passed; and you have neither come nor written. I know you are ill. I entertain no other fear; but my father, I can see, has doubts that have never entered into my mind. I beseech you remove them. A messenger has been waiting for you at Florence to explain to you that my father has become Lord of Imola, and that I have joined him here. It is probable that this good man, Father Peter, may not be able to remain waiting for you any longer, and I

therefore write to let you know where you will find me. That you will seek me as soon as it is possible, or write to me if it is impossible for you to seek me soon, no doubt exists in the mind of your

“LEONORA.”

She folded and sealed the letter, and took it at once to her father; but Ramiro remarked on the green floss silk with which it was tied.

“Take some other color, my child,” he said; and, stretching across the table, he threw before her a small bundle of those silks with which it was customary to attach a seal to letters in that day. “There is crimson,” he said; “that will suit better for the occasion.”

There seemed a meaning lurking in his speech which Leonora did not like; but she obeyed quietly, and was about to leave the letter resealed with him, when he suddenly said—

“Stay! better put in the corner, ‘To be shown to the Reverend Father Peter, at the Casa Morelli, Florence, in case the Signor Lorenzo Visconti should have arrived.’ If he be there, it would be useless to send the letter on to France; if not there, Father Peter will forward it.”

Leonora obeyed willingly, for during the short time she had been in her father's house she had found that the friar was high in Ramiro's good opinion, and that all the attendants, taking the color of their thoughts from those of their lord, spoke well of Father Peter. Nor had the little which she had seen of him in Florence at all enlightened her as to the real character of the man. To the eyes of children fragments of colored glass look like gems,\* and Leonora was too young to distinguish in a moment, as one old and experienced can sometimes do, the false from the true stone.



The direction was written in the corner with her own hand, which prevented the letter from ever reaching her lover.

No sooner was it shown to Mardocchi than he told the messenger he would keep it, as he had certain intelligence that the young cavalier would be in Florence in three days. Lorenzo Visconti had been in Florence long before, and from the old porter of the Casa Morelli had heard the story which Mardocchi had put in the man's mouth: that Leonora had gone to join her father at Imola, thence to proceed immediately to some distant part of Italy, no one knew where. The deaf old man's kindly feeling prevented him from telling all that Mardocchi suggested, namely, that it was Ramiro d'Orco's intention to wed his daughter to some of his new friends in the south, and that Leonora made no opposition. That was the tale which reached Lorenzo afterwards, for

it was diligently spread; and as more than half of the intelligence of Europe was in those days conveyed by rumour, it passed current with most men, though it came in no very tangible form.

No sooner had Cæsar Borgia's courier departed from Florence than Mardocchi set out for Imola. He was engaged in a somewhat hazardous game, and it was necessary for him to be on the spot where it could most conveniently be played. The one predominant passion, however was as strong in his heart as ever, and, had it cost him his life, he would have played out that game for revenge. The circumstances of the time favoured all his machinations. There were no regular posts in those days. Communication was slow and scanty. An armed horseman carried the letter of this or that great lord or merchant from town to town, and sometimes was permitted, if his journey was to be a long one,

to take up small packages from private citizens in the places through which he passed. It may easily be conceived that, in such circumstances as these, it was easy for a villain, shrewd and determined in his purpose, to intercept what communication he pleased. A flagon of fine wine, a golden ducat, readily brought all ordinary couriers to reason; and the dangerous secrets he possessed gave Mardocchi, even with his lord, an influence denied to any other man in Imola.

I may well, therefore, pass over all the details of those means by which he worked the misery of Lorenzo Visconti and Leonora d'Orco. Only two facts require to be mentioned. He soon found, or rather divined, that it would be needful to stop Leonora's correspondence with her cousin Blanche; and after the first two or three no letters, addressed to the latter, left the castle of Imola. They were, in general, burned immediately; but, in carelessly looking through one

of them, the traitor found a few words which he thought might answer his purpose at some future time.

Leonora's pride, in writing to her cousin, had somewhat given way on hearing of the approaching marriage of Blanche and De Vitry, and she alluded sadly to her own disappointment. "For once," she wrote, "an early engagement has been crowned with happiness. Oh! what a fool I was to cast away the first feelings of my heart, without knowing better the man to whom I gave them."

These words were carefully cut out, and when at length a letter from Lorenzo came, sent from Rome by Villanova (the new ambassador of the French king to the papal court), it did not share the fate of the rest. It was a last effort to draw at least some answer from Leonora; and it had very nearly reached her for whom it was intended, the courier having arrived at a very

unusual hour. But Mardocchi was all ears and all eyes, and he stopped the packages at the very door of Ramiro d'Orco's cabinet.

"The good lord slept," he said; "he had been exhausted by long labours in the service of his people. The letters should be delivered as soon as he woke."

In the meantime he held them in charge; and when they were delivered one was missing. That one was sent back again to France some few months before the death of Charles VIII., and into the cover was slipped the scrap of paper containing those words in Leonora's own hand, "Oh! what a fool I was to cast away the first feelings of my heart without knowing better the man to whom I gave them!"

Mardocchi laughed as he placed the writing close under the seal. Whether he saw the extent of the evil he was working, who can tell? Vague notions might flit before his imagination

of dark ulterior consequences—of Ramiro d'Orco's seeking vengeance for the slight shown to his daughter—of Lorenzo's fiery spirit urging on a quarrel—of his own power to direct the dagger or the poison, though he had vowed to use neither with his own hand; but certain it is that no result could be too terrible for his desires.

## CHAPTER VII.

Two years had passed, and Leonora d'Orco had changed with everything around her. Alliances had been formed and broken; great commanders had won victories, and yielded to the stronger hand of Fate. Kings had descended from the proud pitch of power and betaken themselves to the humblest of beds, new combinations had been formed over the whole earth; enemies had become friends, friends enemies; love was burning soon to become cold; and there was coldness where the most ardent passion had once been felt.

I must be pardoned if I pause in my simple tale to show how the strange transforming-rod of time had affected Leonora d'Orco. Anguish, disappointment, anger—yes, I may say anger—had produced for a time those results which mental excitement almost of any kind fails not to work on the human frame.

When a whole year had elapsed without tidings or explanation from Lorenzo Visconti, her cheek might be seen to become paler and paler every day. Her limbs and form could not lose their grace, but they lost their beautiful contour. She became thin as well as pale; her bright eyes, too, lost somewhat of their lustre. She was still a young girl, and it was painful to see how her loveliness faded as her best hopes faded. She sought solitude; she avoided all society; she shunned especially that of men. Her father's was an exception. Parent and child seemed drawn closer together by the



events which had inflicted a different kind of pain upon the heart of each. Often, after gazing at her for a while, cold, stern, remorseless Ramiro d'Orco would suddenly seek his cabinet, and, pressing his hands together till the fingers grew white, would utter but one word—"revenge!"

This state of things lasted but a few months, however, when suddenly a new change came over the beautiful girl. She had been studying hard and diligently, and strange books fell into her hands. It seemed as if from intellectual culture, new sources of happiness became opened to her. It might, indeed, be that pride came to her aid—that she resolved to cast away all thoughts of a man she deemed unworthy of her. It might be that she sought to cheer and solace her father. And yet there must have been something more, some stronger power at work within, for she showed that she was not one of

those "to love again and be again deceived." Oh, no, she would not hear the very name of love.

The gayest, the brightest, the noblest, the most handsome strove for one smile, one token of her favour, but in vain. Yet she came forth from her solitude—she became the star of her father's little court. Amid admiring eyes and looks that seemed almost to worship her, she moved in beauty, but as cold as ice. Colour came back to her cheek, light to her eye, roundness and symmetry to every limb. The sweet, arching lips regained all their redness, but the heart seemed to have lost its warmth for ever.

The tenderness of the young girl, too, had apparently gone—the timidity, the shyness of youth. Not that she was hard, unkind, or harsh—oh, far from it. She was an angel of mercy in that city of Imola. She pleaded for the prisoner, turned often aside the blow from those ap-

pointed to die, solaced the sick and the needy. Her own great wealth, left solely to her disposal, raised up many a drooping head, cheered many a despairing heart. But now she dared to do what she would have shrunk from in the years passed by. She would approach her father, fearless, in his sternest moods, entreat, argue, remonstrate, and often, by the power of her will, bend him from his most settled purposes. Her beauty had acquired something of the character which her mind now assumed, and it must have been now that those pictures we have of her were taken. Though it was of the finest, the most delicate, the most exquisitely engaging style both in line and colouring, there was a dignity in the expression and in the whole air which the canvas can but faintly convey; and yet who could gaze upon her eyes, those wells of light, without seeing that there was some marvellous self-sustaining power within.

Leonora became fond, too, of the decoration of her person. Jewels, and cloth of gold, and rich embroidery decked those lovely hands and arms, or were wreathed in the clustering masses of her jetty hair, or arrayed those graceful limbs; and her tire-women had no longer reason to complain that she forgot her station or neglected her apparel as they had once done. To them she was gentleness itself; but the suitors who still would ask her hand could not but feel that their dismissal had something of the sting of scorn in it. She strove to soften it, but she could not; and the beautiful lip would curl, however mild the words might be, as if she thought it strange that any man could think she would condescend to bestow herself on him.

It must be said, however, that no one had any right to complain of having been led on to love merely to be refused. No approving smile ever encouraged the first advance; and if the atten-

tions were too marked to be misunderstood, a sudden coldness gave the answer without a word. Once only she showed her contempt plainly. It was when a nobleman of pride and power declared he would appeal from her decision to her father. She told him her father had no power to wed her to a man whom she despised, and, if he ever had possessed it, he had given her fate into her own hands long before.

"I have his promise," she said—"a promise that, for good or bad, has not yet been broken to human being—that he will never, even by word, urge me to wed mortal man. So now go, my lord, and appeal to whom you will, but let me not see you any more. I am no man's slave, not even a father's."

There were violent things done in Italy in those days; and I know not whether it was some idle but threatening words, muttered by this bold lover as he left her, or the rumour

that Imola was soon to be visited by Cæsar Borgia—the only being on earth she seemed to fear—that had led her to a step which must be told.

There was a monastery of Cistercian monks upon a hill some five miles distant from Imola, and, in the early morning of a summer's day, a gallant cavalcade of some eight horsemen and three women, with Leonora at their head, stopped at the gates. She dismounted, and, bidding the attendants wait, went in alone. She asked the porter to call Father Angelo to her; but the old man, when he came, evidently knew her not. He was a servile-looking, shrewd-eyed man, and her air, as well as her attire, impressed him. "What is it, daughter?" he said. "Can I give you any spiritual aid?"

Leonora fixed her lustrous eyes upon him, and seemed to look into his very heart. "No, father," she answered; "I have my own confessor, and a

holy and good man he is. It is aid of another kind I seek from you. I have heard that you have cultivated much the natural sciences, know all the secret virtues of herbs and minerals, and have prepared drugs which will remove from earth a dangerous friend or a potent enemy."

"But, daughter," said the monk, interrupting her, "these drugs are not to be intrusted to girls and children, and—"

"Hear me out," she said; "I seek none of these. What I demand, and what I must have, is for my own defence. One I loved very well was once injured by a poisoned weapon, and it took much skill and deep knowledge to save his life. It struck me then, and it has often occurred to my mind since, that a weapon so anointed were no poor defence, even in a woman's feeble hand. Nay, more, that if placed beyond all hope of safety, she might preserve herself from wrong by a slight scratch, when her coward hand might

fail to plunge the weapon in her own heart. Once such a means might have been needful to me, but, thank Heaven, another mode of escape was found. See here. I have bought this dagger against time of need. The groove, you see, is perfect, but I want that which makes it efficacious. That you must give—sell me, I should have said, for you shall have gold enough; and if any scruple linger in your mind, I promise you, by all I hold most sacred, never to use it but in my own defence.”

“Well, there may be truth in what you say,” replied the monk. “Rome is not far off, and there are strange things, they tell me, taking place in Rome. But you are a strange lady, and approach boldly matters that even men treat with some circumlocution.”

“I do so because my purposes are holy,” replied Leonora. “I have nothing to conceal, because I have nothing to fear, good father.



But let us not waste time. Will a hundred ducats satisfy you?"

"It should be a hundred and fifty," said the monk. "Such things are dangerous, and our good father the Pope has strictly forbidden the sale of these drugs to anybody out of his own family."

"Well, take the hundred and fifty," said Leonora. "Bring the poison quickly, for my attendants will grow impatient."

"But I must mark the vial 'Poison,'" he replied; "then, if you misuse it, the fault is yours."

"Mark it what you please," she answered. "Here is the money in this purse when you bring the drug; but be speedy."

The old man gazed into her eyes for a moment as if to read her real purposes; then bidding her remain beneath the arch, he hurried away. In a few minutes he returned with a small vial con-

taining a white powder, and not only gave it to her, but showed her how to apply it to the blade of the dagger so that the slightest scratch would prove fatal. "Mix it with water," he said, "and then a drop not bigger than a drop of dew will do; and remember, daughter, this is no common drug, such as vulgar, unlearned assassins use. Its effects are instant, either taken by the lips or infused into the veins. Be cautious, therefore; and mind, when you apply it, use a thick gauntlet."

"There—there—there is the money," said Leonora, taking the vial eagerly; and then she added, speaking to herself, "Now, man, I defy you. I have my safety in my own hands," and, paying the monk the money, she remounted her horse and rode down the hill.

The old monk, while he counted the money carefully, gazed after her, muttering to himself, "Now that is for some fair rival, belike, or else

for some faithless lover. Mayhap her husband has played her false. Ay, Heaven help us! we have always some good excuse for covering over our real intentions from the eyes of others. To save her honor at the expense of her life! That is a likely tale indeed! We have no Lucretias now-a-days except the Pope's daughter, and she is a Lucretia of another sort."

Whatever the old man in his hardened nature might think, Leonora d'Orco had no purpose but the one she stated. She had long felt the necessity of the means of self-defence. She had long known that the only dread she ever experienced now, would vanish if she possessed the immediate power of life or death over an assailant or over herself. The dagger she had bought in Florence some weeks after the burning of the Villa Morelli, but she doubted her strength—not her courage—to use it with effect. But when the least wound would prove fatal, the weapon

had a higher value. "One scratch upon my arm or upon his hand," she said to herself, "and I am safe from worse than death."

It must have been a terrible state of society which led a young girl to contemplate such a resource as a blessing. I cannot venture to give anything like a picture of that state. Suffice it that the fears of Leonora d'Orco were not superfluous, nor her precautions without cause.

## CHAPTER VIII.

I HAVE heard it said that the world is weary of the picturesque in writing, tired of landscape painters, eager only for the tale or for the characters—the pepper and salt of fiction. So be it. But yet there is something in a scene—in the place, in the very spot where any great events are enacted, which gives not only an identity, but a harmony to the narrative of these events. Imola, with its old castle and its sombre walls now repaired and strengthened by the care of Ramiro d'Orco, lay, like the hard and rugged stone of the peach, in the centre of more sweet and beautiful things.

That was the age of villa building in Italy, and, as I have shown in a previous part of this work, some of the noblest architects that the world ever produced had already appeared, and produced specimens of a new and characteristic style, unsurpassed by any other efforts. Imola was surrounded by villas, but there was one more costly and extensive than any of the rest, which hung upon the hill side, with gardens, and terraces, and fountains round about. The villa now belonged to Ramiro d'Orco, and thither he would often retire, after the labours of the day were over, to walk, solitary and thoughtful, as was his wont, under the great stone-pines which lined the avenue.

It was the favorite home of Leonora; for, though she was so much changed in every habit, if not in every thought, there was one exception—she still loved to sit beneath the trees or upon a terrace, whence she could see over a wide land-

scape. She no longer sought absolute solitude; it is true; she suffered herself not to be plunged into those deep fits of thought, which had been her only comfort during Lorenzo's long absence at Naples. Usually she had one of her maids with her, well-educated girls, who could converse, though not very profoundly; and their light talk, though it did not always wean her mind from the subjects on which it was bent, just sufficed to ripple the too still waters of meditation.

She was thus seated one afternoon, just in the beginning of the autumn, in an angle of the gardens, whence she could see on all sides around but one, with a girl named Carlotta at her feet. If there be aught on earth which deserves the name of divine, it is the weather in some parts of Italy when the summer has lost its full heat, and the autumn knows nothing yet of wintry chill, when the grape is just beginning to grow

purple, and the cheek of the fig looks warm. Such was that day, and it would seem that the balmy influence of the air and the brightness of the scene had their influence upon poor Leonora, bringing back some of the gaiety and sportiveness of other years.

"So, foolish Carlotta," said her mistress, "you must needs go down to the dusty town this morning—to see your lover, I warrant, and arrange for this wedding I have heard of."

Carlotta blushed and smiled, and said "Ay;" and her mistress gave her a tap upon the cheek, exclaiming—

"Out upon you, silly girl! can you not be content without making yourself a slave?"

"It is woman's nature, lady," replied the girl; "we all like to be slaves to those we love. I do believe that there is no woman who does not wish to marry; and do you know, lady, that people



wonder that you have never given your hand to any one."

"I!" exclaimed Leonora, with a start, and an expression almost of pain upon her face; "I marry any one! I wish to marry any one! to be the passive plaything of a rude boor—to be sported with at his will and pleasure—to have the sanctity of my chamber invaded by a coarse man! When I think of it, I cannot but marvel that any woman, with the feelings of a woman, can so degrade herself."

"The feelings of the woman prompt her, lady," said Carlotta; "but, do you know, I saw a man at Mother Agostina's—that is, my Bernardino's aunt—a courier just returned from France, and he told me that all the people there say that you are married."

"More likely to be buried, my Carlotta," replied Leonora; "but what have the people of France to do with me?"

"Why, they seem to have a great deal to do with Italy now," rejoined the girl. "Since the Pope's son has been to the place they call Chinon, and has been made Duke of Valentinois by the new king of France, that monarch seems to be as much Pope in Rome as the Holy Father himself. Have you not heard, lady, that a whole crowd of Frenchmen—lords and knights, and such like—are coming over with some chosen troops to help Alexander and the new duke to make up a great duchy here in Italy for him who used to be a cardinal, and who is now a soldier?"

"No, I have heard nothing of it," replied Leonora; "doubtless my father has, if the gossip be true."

"Oh! it is quite true, lady," replied the girl; "all was in preparation when Giacomo came away, and, besides, at the King of France's desire, the Pope has made one of these young

lords Prefect of Romagna. But he is Italian by birth, they say, and a cousin of the King of France, and brings his beautiful young wife with him."

Leonora rose from her seat and gazed into the girl's eyes for a moment in silence, with a look that almost frightened poor Carlotta. "Did you hear his name?" she asked, at length.

"It was Lorenzo something," replied the girl; "Visconti, I think."

Leonora turned away abruptly, and with a quick step climbed the hill, entered the villa, and sought her own apartments. She passed through the anteroom, and through that where her maids sat embroidering, without speaking a word, and entering her own chamber, cast herself down upon her bed and wept.

"Fool! fool! fool that I am!" she cried, at length, starting up. "I thought I had torn it out by the roots; but it is there still."

She drew the dagger, in its sheath of velvet and gold, from her bosom, gazed at it for a moment and murmured,

“Only this, or what this gives, can root it out; but no, no, I am not mad. This will all pass away. I will conquer it now—even now. I may have to see him again! Then I will look upon him now, as he was when I believed him faithful and true, as he was when he seemed all that was noble and just,” and, opening a drawer in the table, she took forth a small, beautiful gilded frame, in the centre of which appeared the sketch of Lorenzo which had been drawn by Leonardo da Vinci. “Ah! picture,” she said, gazing at it, “how often hast thou been my comfort and solace in other hours—ay, even to the last; for who could gaze upon that noble face and think the soul so base! Lorenzo! Lorenzo! you have made my misery! Pray God that you have not made your own

too. What has become of good Leonardo's auguries? what of his dream, that by the features you could read the spirit? But it matters not. I will steel myself to meet you, should you come—to gaze upon this fair wife you have preferred to Leonora, and who, men say, is so light and so unworthy of the man I thought you. Perhaps she may suit you better than I should have done; for God knows she cannot be more fickle than you are. Yes, the momentary madness is passing away. I shall soon be myself again, and will play my part to the end, let it be what it may.”

“Madam, a cavalier below desires to see you,” said a servant, opening the door abruptly. Leonora started with a look almost of terror, for her mind was so full of one object that she thought the stranger could be no other than Lorenzo; but the servant went on: “He says his name is Leonardo da Vinci, and that you know him.”

"This is strange," said Leonora to herself; and then turning to the man she added, "Take him to my own saloon, and see that he and his servants be well cared for. I will be down in a few moments."

She washed away the marks of tears from her eyes, brushed smooth her hair, and then descended the short flight of steps which led as a private way from her chamber to the gorgeous room below, which was known and held sacred as her own saloon. She found the great painter standing in the midst, and gazing at some fine pictures which ornamented the walls.

"Welcome, signor," she said—"most welcome to Imola. No other house must be your home while you are here than this, or my father's palace in the citadel."

"Your pardon, bright lady," said Leonardo, gazing at her, "my home is ever an inn, and I cannot sacrifice my liberty even to you."

"You are wise, maestro," answered Leonora, somewhat gravely. "No man should sacrifice his liberty to a woman, nor any woman to a man. It is a new creed I have got but I think, it is a good one."

"Old creeds are best," replied Leonardo, seriously. "We can advance from one to another, as we can mount the steps of a temple to the holy of holies, but each step must be founded upon that which went before, and each must rest upon truth."

"Alas! where shall we find truth?" asked Leonora; and then she added, in a melancholy but sweet tone, "Let us not approach painful subjects, my good friend. We cannot meet without thinking of them. If we speak of them we shall think of them still more. I know that truth is in my own heart—where else I know not."

"Perhaps where you least think," replied the

painter; "but you are right, lady. Could it do any good, I might speak even of the most painful things; but where the irrevocable seal is fixed it is vain to explain—vain to regret. You are as beautiful as ever, I see, but with that change which change of thought and feeling brings. I have come to paint your picture; and I can paint it now better than I could when we last met."

"Indeed! How so?" asked Leonora.

"Because it is easier to paint matter than spirit—angel or demon, as the case may be—which, transfusing itself through the whole frame, breathes from the face and animates every movement. Again, at other times, it leaves the human tenement vacant, or sits retired in a corner of the heart, pondering the bitterness of life. Mere animal life then acts, and carries us through the business of existence; but the sentient, feeling soul is dead or en-



tranced, and pervades not the face or limbs with that varying beauty which is so difficult for the painter to seize and to transfer. I can paint you better now than formerly; and the painting to the common eye will be more beautiful, but to mine and to the poet's there may be a lack of something—of that expression of soul which the features require for harmony—and yet it is not entirely wanting. When you first came in, there was a rigidity about your look, as if you mastered some emotion. Now there is more light, as if there were emotion still. You must have suffered agitation lately. Forgive me. I am a rough, plain-spoken man, too apt to give counsel where it is not sought, and to note feelings people would wish concealed.”

“You see too deeply and too well,” replied Leonora; “but still I say, maestro, let us not converse on such things. The past is dead. The present, alas! has no life in it for me.

Emotion is the most transient of all things with me. Like a stone dropped by a boy into a still lake, it may go deep but ripples the surface only for a moment, and all is still again. If you wish my portrait, take it; but let not our thoughts be saddened while the work is beneath your hand by memories of other days, when happiness gave that spirit to my face which, as you judge rightly, has departed for ever. Let us talk of art, of science—what you will, in short; for I have studied much since last we met, and can encounter you with more knowledge, but not less humility; but let us speak no more of buried feelings, the very ghosts of which bring fear and anguish with them."

"Alas! that it should be so, sweet lady," replied Leonardo; "but, sad as may be your fate, there may be others, seemingly more happy, who are more miserable still."

"Nay I am not miserable," she answered;

but then, recollecting the ~~man~~ insight of the  
 man she spoke to, she ~~answered~~ said, "If I  
 am 'tis but in ~~its~~ ~~as an old woman~~ I am  
 told, long headed, will ~~meet~~ with a change of  
 weather, so as ~~time~~ ~~or~~ ~~not~~ ~~at~~ ~~all~~ when  
 something ~~comes~~ a ~~weather~~. But enough of  
 this, ~~much~~ ~~about~~ ~~is~~ ~~most~~ ~~imposed~~ on the  
 wall. ~~There~~ ~~was~~ ~~no~~ ~~one~~ ~~and~~ ~~that~~  
 the ~~face~~ ~~is~~ ~~most~~ ~~are~~ ~~they~~ ~~not~~ ~~beautiful?~~"

"~~Yes~~ ~~are~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~replied~~ ~~Leonarda~~."

"~~Yes~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~It~~ ~~will~~ ~~one~~ ~~day~~ ~~be~~ ~~one~~."

"~~Yes~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~replied~~ ~~Leonarda~~."

"~~Yes~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~replied~~ ~~Leonarda~~."

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"~~Yes~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~replied~~ ~~Leonarda~~."

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"~~Yes~~ ~~in~~ ~~summer~~ ~~replied~~ ~~Leonarda~~."

“ ‘ Perhaps I might find truth where I least thought,’ ” said Leonora to herself. “ Those were his words. What can he mean? ‘ There may be those, seemingly more happy, who are more miserable still.’ There is something beneath all this; but it is vain—vain—all vain. I will think of it no more;” and yet she thought.

## CHAPTER IX.

"PREFECT of Romagna!" said Ramiro d'Orco to himself, walking up and down his private cabinet in the castle of Imola; "that may create a conflict of jurisdictions with the vicars of the Church. It is an awkward office to give or to hold."

He spoke in a low voice to himself, and though his words were serious, and implied a difficulty of some magnitude, there was an unwonted smile upon his lip, as if there was something that satisfied him well.

He rang a little silver bell which stood upon

the table, and when a servant appeared, ordered him to seek for Father Peter and bring him thither. The man was a long time absent, but Ramiro d'Orco sat quietly, with that well-pleased smile on his lip, gazing at some papers before him, but quite unconscious of the characters with which they were covered. What were his meditations, who can say? for some smiles are not altogether pleasant; and his was far from being benign.

At length the friar appeared—now in reality a friar, for there were strange transformations in those days; assassins sometimes became friars, and friars were not unfrequently assassins.

“Sit, good father, sit,” said Ramiro d'Orco, “I have news for you.”

“Good news, I hope, my lord,” replied Mardocchi. “I have some news for you, too; but mine is not the best; however, it matters but little.”

"Mine matters much," said Ramiro d'Orco. "What think you, Mardocchi? Our friend, Lorenzo Visconti has been appointed by the Pope, at the instigation of Louis XII., King of France, Prefect of Romagna, and is about, in this fine weather, to make a tour through the exarchate and the legations. He must come to Imola of course; and I have letters here from that high and mighty prince Cæsar, Duke of Valentinois, requiring me, by the favour in which I stand with him, to receive the prefect with all due honour, and to make his time pass pleasantly. We will do it, Mardocchi—we will do it; for, although there is a very palpable hint in Borgia's missive that no harm is to be done to the cousin of King Louis, yet, perhaps, we can so manage that he shall find means to harm himself. He has an army at his back to help Cæsar Borgia in carving out a principality from the heart of Italy; but the vicars of the Holy See, and I

as the humblest of them, must reverently crave his holiness to spare us the burden of the prefect's troops. We will receive him gladly with a noble train, but methinks we cannot admit an armed French force within our walls."

"Of course," replied Mardocchi, "that would be selling yourself to the devil without pay. But I should think he would not come to Imola. He cannot like to shew himself before your eyes—and, if he did come, it would be somewhat painful to the signora your daughter."

"He will come—he will come," replied Ramiro; "and he shall be gallantly received. Fêtes and festivals shall greet him; he shall have every reverence and every joy. He shall be taught to think that we can forget as easily as he can; but he shall find that to slight the daughter of Ramiro d'Orco is to tread upon an asp. As for my Leonora she has a proud and a



noble heart. I have seen all the struggles—I have marked the terrible conflict in her breast, and she has come out victorious. My word for it, she will meet the young prefect and his fair wife with all calm courtesy, greet him as an old friend, and seem never to remember that he betrayed her unsuspecting heart, slighted her love, and left her to disappointment and regret.”

“That is all very good for the beginning,” said Mardocchi, who was quite a practical man; “but how does your lordship intend to proceed in the more weighty part of the business? This Lorenzo Visconti is not so easily reached as people might suppose. I told you how he killed my friend and lord, Buondoni, under the very nose of the Duke of Milan—a better man than Signor Buondoni never lived—and, if my advice had been taken, and a dagger used instead of a sword, the youth would not have troubled

us any more; but Buondoni was always fond of the sword, and of doing things openly, and so—”

“I know the whole history better than even you do, my friend,” replied Ramiro d’Orco; “Buondoni did like the sword, but he liked it well annointed, and this Lorenzo would have died had I not cured him. His life is mine, for I saved it for him; but as to how I shall proceed I cannot yet determine. That must depend upon the time and circumstances of his coming; but I have thought it needful to have you warned and prepared in the matter; for on your skill and assistance I rely, and you know I never forget services rendered any more than offences given.”

Mardocchi made no answer for a few minutes, but remained gazing in silent thought upon the ornamented floor, until, at length, Ramiro exclaimed:

"You make no answer, friar; what are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking," said Mardocchi slowly, "of what a glorious thing it would be if we could so entangle him that we could make him not only forfeit his own life, but also that honour and renown of which he is so proud. Such things have been done, my lord, and may be done again. I have heard that when Galeazzo was Duke of Milan, he got a cavalier to poison his own sister to save her honour, as he thought, then proved the crime upon him, and put him to the rack. Now, this Lorenzo, if I have heard rightly, cares little for mere life—nay, would almost thank the man who took it from him."

"Why so?" asked Ramiro, sharply, a sudden doubt flashing across his mind, like a light in a dark night, lost again as soon as seen; "why so, friar?"

“If there be any truth,” said Mardocchi, fully on his guard, “in the reports brought by the followers of the great duke from France, this wife whom he has wedded is as light a piece of vanity as ever made a husband miserable. Nothing has been proved against her, but there are many suspicions of her faithlessness. She is ever followed by a train of lovers, giving her smiles now to the one, now to the other. Visconti feels the wound with all the bitterness of a proud heart, but cannot find the cure. In the mean while he bears himself carelessly, as if he thought not of it; but Antonio Pistrucci, Duke Cæsar’s under purse-bearer, assured me that the young man was weary of his life, and that, at the storming of a castle in Navarre, he so clearly sought to lose it that the whole army saw his purpose. What I would infer, my lord, is this: if you give him merely death, you give him what he wants, and he remains unpunished; but

if you give him dishonor too, you inflict a ~~that~~ that other men feel in death, and something more besides."

"That were hard to accomplish," said Ramiro d'Orco, rising, and pacing backward and forward in the room; "I see not how it can be done."

"We have time to think, my lord," replied the friar; "leave me to devise a scheme. If my brain be better than a mouldy biscuit, I will find some means. If I fail, we can always recur to the ordinary plan."

"Well, ingenuity does much," said Ramiro d'Orco; "and, as you say, Mardocchi, there is time to consider our plans well. But you mentioned news you had to bring me: what may be their purport?"

"'Tis no great matter," answered Mardocchi; "but it bears upon the very subject we have spoken of. As I came hither at your lordship's

order; I saw, riding in by the Forli gate, no other than an old friend of mine, one Antonio, whom you know well, for he procured me the honor of your service. I know not whether he is a follower of this Lorenzo still, but I should think he is; and if I can find him in the city, where he must stop at least to bait his horse, I can perhaps procure information which may be serviceable."

"Serviceable indeed," replied Ramiro d'Orco, with more eagerness than he was accustomed to show; "hasten down, good friar. See where he lodges; obtain all the news you can from him. What we most want is information of this young man's plans and purposes. That once obtained, we can shape our own course to meet them. But remember, my good Mardocchi, this man, this Antonio is a personage to be treated warily. He is shrewd and far-seeing. You must guard well every word you say."

"I know him well, my lord," replied Mardocchi. "We were at school together when we were boys, and he is not much changed since. But I will not waste time in talking. He was riding fast when I saw him, and perhaps he may only stop to bait his horse and get some food for himself."

Thus saying, Mardocchi left the room, and proceeded straight from the castle through the sort of esplanade that lay before the gates, and into the town. He walked fast, but with a meditative air; and it must be remembered that he had many things to consider.

When there is in the human heart a consciousness of evil done, there is always more or less fear; and his first thoughts were directed to calculate what were the chances of explanations taking place between Lorenzo Visconti and Ramiro d'Orco if they ever met again on familiar terms.

He soon saw, however, that those chances were small; that Lorenzo, by his marriage, had placed a barrier between the present and the past, that was not likely to be overleaped; and that while he was certain never to seek explanations himself, there was as little probability of Ramiro or Leonora either giving or receiving them.

"Besides," he argued, "if all the explanations in the world took place, they can prove nothing in the world against me."

The next consideration that presented itself was the promise he made Antonio to practise nothing against his lord's life; and though it may seem strange that a man so utterly unscrupulous should attach such importance to an adherence to his word, yet we see such anomalies every day in human character, and in his case it might easily be explained, if we had time or space to bestow upon it.

Suffice it, however, to say, in a few words,



that this adherence to his word, once pledged, was the only virtue he had retained through life. A stubborn adhesion to his resolutions of any kind had characterized him even as a boy, and it had become a matter of pride with him to abide by what he had said. The difficulty with him now was that Ramiro d'Orco would indubitably require assistance from his own hand in taking vengeance upon Lorenzo Visconti, if some means could not be found to betray the young nobleman into some dangerous act which would fall back upon his own head.

This scheme had flashed suddenly through his mind while conversing with Ramiro; and he saw in it the only means of escaping from the breach of his word, or the acknowledgment of scruples which he knew would be treated with contempt. The plan when he first suggested it, was without form or feature; but now his busy and crafty brain eagerly pursued the train, and a thousand

schemes suggested themselves, some of which were feasible, some wild and hopeless.

During all this time, however, he forgot no his immediate errand. He watched everything passing in the street around him, and looked in at the two small taverns in the street of the citadel. There was a better inn, however, on the small square by the bishop's palace, where were also most of the best houses of the city, and thither Mardocchi bent his way. On reaching it, he entered the great court-yard, and inquired if any strangers had arrived that day.

"Yes, father," replied the ostler to whom he spoke, "some seven or eight; one gentleman, with four or five servants and three sumpter mules, and two or three other persons."

"I will go into the stable and see the horses, my son," said Mardocchi. "You know I am fond of a fine beast, and my own mule has not its match in Imola."

The two strolled onward to the stable door, conversing familiarly, as was the custom with friar and citizen in those days; and Mardocchi passed down the line of stalls, discussing the merits of the horses, till at length he laid his hand upon the haunch of a fine grey barb, saying, "I want to see the man who rode this horse."

"He is within, at dinner in the hall," answered the ostler. "He came himself to see his horse fed while they got ready for him. He is a careful signor, and marks everything he sees. He told me in a minute that those other horses belong to the great maestro Leonardo da Vinci, though he did not know him, for they passed each other close without speaking."

"I will go in and see him," said the friar; and entering the inn by the backway, he strolled into the dining-hall with an indifferent and purposeless look, as if there was no object in his coming.

Antonio was sitting alone at a table, with his back towards the door by which Mardocchi entered; but the tread of the latter upon the rushes which strewed the floor made the other turn sharply round as he came near.

"Ah! Signor Antonio, is that you?" exclaimed Mardocchi; "why what, in Fortune's name, brings you to Imola?"

"Well met, father—father what is your name? for, by my faith, I have forgotten," cried Antonio, keeping his eye fixed upon him more firmly than Mardocchi altogether liked; "and what brings you to the Keys of St. Peter? I thought that taverns and public-houses were forbidden to your sacred calling except in time of travel."

"Many things are forbidden that men do," replied Mardocchi, with a laugh; "and my sacred calling does not prevent my throat from getting dry. I came seeking a small flagon of the

wine they have here, which is the best in Italy. Have you tasted it?"

"Good faith! no," answered Antonio; "I thought not to find anything worth drinking in this small, dull place."

"Then I will have a big flagon instead of a small one," rejoined Mardocchi, "and you shall share it with me. Here, drawer! drawer! bring me a big flagon of that same old Orvietto wine which I had when last I was here. You mistake much, Signor Antonio, both as to the wine and as to the place. It is no dull town, I can tell you, but as gay a city as any in Italy."

"It will be gayer before we have done with it," replied Antonio, "for there are high doings where my lady is, and she will be here ere many days are over."

"Indeed!" said Mardocchi; "but taste that wine, my son—taste that wine, and tell me if ever you drank better. Sour stuff we used to

have where I passed my novitiate. They were strict in nothing but that, Antonio; but it was the rule of the order that the body must be mortified in some way, and they judged that the wine way was the safest; for, there being taverns not far off, a man might mend his drink when he went out to buy for the convent."

"By my faith! it is good, indeed," said Antonio, after a deep draught; "if the meat be as good as the drink, we shall fare well."

"No where better," replied the friar; "woodcocks with bills that long, and breasts that thick" (and he demonstrated the measures on his arm and hand); "beef as fat and as juicy as if it had been cut out of an abbot's sirloin; fish from the Adriatic and the brook for Fridays; and now and then a wild-boar steak, which would make a hermit break Lent."

"Well then, my lady will fare sumptuously, and I shall be spared scolding the purveyors,

as I was obliged to do at Forli," was Antonio's reply.

"But you speak only of your lady," remarked Mardocchi; "does not your lord come likewise?"

"That I cannot tell," answered Antonio; "I only know that she comes first, and waits for him here, while he makes a tour through the legations. He thinks the air of Rome too cool for her health, and, as he is very careful of her, she comes hither."

There was a sly humour in his speech which Mardocchi well understood; and he asked, "But why did he choose Imola for her residence; because he thought it was so dull, as you said just now?"

"He did not choose it," replied Antonio; "no no, 'twas she. He gave her the choice of several cities around, and she chose Imola. She knew, perhaps, it was the place he would least like; for some of the good-natured babblers of the

court had taken care to tell her of certain passages in days past, and also that the lady of his early love lived here. Madonna Eloise might think it would give him pain to meet a dame who had treated him so unkindly, and so she chose Imola."

"Theirs must be a sweet life, by all accounts," said the friar; "I have heard a good deal of this matter before from men in the cardinal's train when he went to France. - They say she is unfaithful to him."

"Nay, nay, not unfaithful," replied Antonio, quickly, "but light enough to make men think her so. But now, my good friend Mardocchi, what makes you interest yourself so much in all this matter? You have got over all old grudges by this time, I hope."

"No," answered Mardocchi bluntly, "I never forget grudges or promises either, Antonio. You tied my hands, or I would have sent your lord



to a better world long ago. I could have taken his life in the French camp, just when he parted from the old Cardinal Julian; for I was close behind them both, and nobody would have known it."

"I should," replied Antonio, "for I know your handiwork, Mardocchi, just as a connoisseur knows the touch of a great master's pencil. But why should you bear him ill will? His sword got you a much better master than Buondoni."

"That I deny," said Mardocchi; "besides, I am little with this Signor Ramiro now? I am but a poor friar, and he is a great lord."

"Yes, but you are much with greater lords than he," said Antonio. "I have heard of you in Rome, Mardocchi; and I could tell where you were on certain nights which you wot of; but I am as secret as the grave, my good friend.

Now tell me how it fares with the Lady Leonora?"

"Oh, she is well, and gay as a sunbeam," replied Mardocchi; "the life and the delight of the city."

"Methinks if I had treated a lover so, first broke his heart and then driven him to wed without love, I should not be quite so happy," was Antonio's answer.

"It is strange," said the friar, in a natural tone; "but women are full of wild caprices."

"That is true, indeed," replied Antonio; "but she might at least have written to say she had changed her mind—that her mood was altered—that she had seen some one else she loved better."

"Did she never write?" asked the friar.

"He never received her letter if she did," answered Antonio, in a tone so peculiar that

Mardocchi's cheek changed color, not unperceived by his companion. But Antonio instantly sought another subject, and the conversation was prolonged for more than an hour. The wine was very good, and both drank deep; but neither could persuade the other to pass the bound where the brain becomes unsteady and the tongue treacherous. When they rose to separate, the balance of knowledge gained, however, was certainly on Antonio's side. He had told nothing but what was known, or soon would be known to every one. Neither had the monk in words; but Antonio gathered not his intelligence from words. It was one of his quaint sayings that no two things were so opposite as words and facts. But every look, every turn of expression, every doubtful phrase, or endeavour to evade the point or double round the question, gave him light; and by the time Mardocchi left him, if he had not

reached the truth, he had come somewhat near it.

True, he fancied that the friar had been but Ramiro's instrument in breaking through the engagement between Leonora and her lover; but that her letters had been stopped, and probably Lorenzo's intercepted, he did not doubt. To a mind so keen as his this was a sufficient clue to after discoveries; and, while Mardocchi hurried back to the citadel to tell Ramiro that Antonio would stay out the day, and was about to hire the great Casa Orsina, next to the bishop's palace, for the prefect's wife—that she would be in Imola in a few days, and that Lorenzo's coming was uncertain.

Antonio remained for half an hour in thought. "No, no," he said to himself, "hers was true love, if ever I beheld it; and he says she is gay, the life and soul of the place. That is unnatural—she loves him still! And he, poor

youth, loves her; and is ever contrasting her in his mind with this light, half-harlot wife, with whom it has pleased Heaven to curse him. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at her—I can see it when she scatters round her smiles on the gilded coxcombs of the court. Yet there must be something more to discover, and, please God, I will discover it.”

## CHAPTER X.

DAYS flew; the wife of the prefect arrived at Imola; Ramiro d'Orco went out to meet her at a league's distance from the city; no honor, no attention did he neglect; the guards at the gates received her drawn up in martial array; and in the palace which had been engaged for her, at the foot of the great staircase, Leonora waited with her maids to welcome the young wife of him whom she had so tenderly loved.

It was a strange meeting between these two girls—for both were yet girls—neither twenty

years of age. They both gazed upon each other with curious, scrutinizing eyes; but their feelings were very different. Eloise de Chaumont marvelled at Leonora's wonderful beauty—at the profusion of her jetty hair—at the softened lustre of her large, full, shaded eyes—at the delicate carving of the ever varying features—at the undulating grace, flowing, with every movement of her rounded, symmetrical limbs, into some new form of loveliness. She thought, "Well, she is beautiful, indeed! No wonder Lorenzo loved her. But, on my faith, she does not appear one to treat any man cruelly. I should rather think she would yield at love's first summons."

Leonora, on the other hand, though she was calm and perfectly composed, felt matter for pain in the gaze which Eloise fixed upon her. She could plainly see that Lorenzo's wife knew of the love which had once existed between him and

herself: "Perhaps he himself had told her of it—and how had he told it? Had he boasted that he had won her heart and then cast her off? She would not believe it. Notwithstanding all she believed him to be noble still. He might be fickle; but Lorenzo could not be base. Oh yes, fickle he was even to Eloise," she thought. "From every report which had reached her, he had soon wearied of her who had supplanted the first love of his heart."

A certain wavering look of grief, which came from time to time into the countenance of Eloise, showed that she too was somehow disappointed, and a strange, unnatural bond of sympathy seemed to establish itself between two hearts the most opposite in feelings and in principles, the least likely, from circumstances, to be linked together.

They passed nearly an hour together; and Eloise promised on the following day to come and



partake of a banquet at the villa on the hill. She had a sort of caressing way with her which was very winning; and when Leonora told her she must go, for that Leonardo, the great painter, waited her at home, she took the once promised bride of her husband in her arms, and held her there for a moment, kissing her cheek tenderly. "You are very beautiful," she whispered; "well may the painter take you for his model?"

Leonora blushed and disengaged herself; and, though she was still calm as a statue externally many an hour passed before her heart recovered from the agitation of that interview.

She was destined to feel more emotion, too, that day. Leonardo da Vinci waited her as she expected, and at once proceeded to his work. While Ramiro d'Orco remained, the painter was nearly silent; but as soon as the baron was gone, he began to speak; and his speech was cruel upon

poor Leonora. He asked her many questions regarding her late meeting with Lorenzo's wife, made her describe Eloise, and commented as she spoke.

Then he began to ask questions as to the past—not direct and intrusive, but such as forced indirectly much of the truth from Leonora regarding her own feelings and her view of Lorenzo's conduct—and the painter meditated gloomily. He had not yet mentioned Lorenzo's name, but at length it was spoken with a melancholy allusion to the many chances, deceits, and accidents which might bring disunion between two hearts both true.

Leonora burst into tears, and, starting up exclaimed, "I cannot—I cannot, my friend. If you would have my picture, forbear! Come to-morrow; to-day I can bear no more."

So saying, she left room, and Leonardo remained in thought, sometimes gazing at the

picture he had commenced, sometimes at the pallet in his hand, figuring in fancy strange forms and glowing landscapes out of the colors daubed upon it. But though the eye, and the fancy, and the imagination had occupation, the reasoning mind, which has a strange faculty of separating itself from things which seem its attributes, nay, even parts of its essence to the superficial eye, was busy with matters altogether different. It was engaged with Leonora and her fate.

“ This is strange—this is unaccountable,” he thought; “ she loves him still; she always has loved him. She casts the blame of their separation on him; and he—miserable young man!—thinks her to blame, and has put a seal upon his own wretchedness by marrying yon light piece of vanity whom I saw in Rome. Pride, pride! How much wretchedness would be spared if people would condescend to explain; and yet

perhaps there has been some dark work under this; it must be so, or some explanation would have taken place. I will search it to the bottom. I will know the whole ere I am done. They cannot, they shall not baffle me."

He started up, laid down his pallet and his brushes, and then, after gazing at the picture for a moment, took his way down the few steps which led from Leonora's saloon down to a little flower-garden, shaded by some pine trees, in a quiet nook at the end of the terrace. Two marble steps brought him to the terrace itself, and, hurrying along its broad expanse, not without feeling and noticing the beauty of the view, Leonardo reached the wide avenue, lined with stone-pines, which led to the gates of the gardens.

About half way down he met a man coming leisurely up; and, as his all-noting eye fell upon him, the painter suddenly stopped, saying:

"Who are you, my friend? I know your face right well, and yet I cannot attach a name to it."

"I know yours too, signor," replied the other; "but there is difference between Leonardo da Vinci, the great master, and poor Antonio, the humble friend and servant of Lorenzo Visconti; the one name will live for ever, the other will never be known. I met you and spoke to you once or twice at Belgiojoso in happier days."

"Ay, I recollect you now," said Leonardo; "but how happens it, my friend, that you are going up to the villa of the Signor d'Orco and his daughter?"

"I was going to see the young signora," replied Antonio. "I do not perceive why I should not. I have ever loved her in my humble way, and love her still; for, to tell the truth, Signor, Maestro, I cannot believe that she has ever

wilfully ill-treated one whom I love better still."

"Nor I—nor I, Antonio," cried the painter, eagerly grasping his arm; "she believes that he has ill-treated her."

"Nay, God knows, not that," replied Antonio. "Oh, had you seen how he pined, signor, for the least news of her, or how his heart was torn and moved when his letters were returned with nothing but a scrap of her handwriting, contemptuous in its tone and meaning, you would know at once he is not to blame."

"Nor she either, by my hopes of Heaven!" cried Leonardo. "But come with me, good friend—come with me. You cannot see the lady—she is ill; and I have matter for your own private ear. There is some dark mystery here, which I fain would unravel with

your aid. I am resolute to sound it to the very depth."

"But how can we do that?" said Antonio; "those who have kept their secrets so well and so long, are not likely to let it slip out of their hands now. These are no babes we have to deal with, signor, and if Ramiro d'Orco is at the bottom of it, you might as well hope to see through a block of stone as to discover anything that is in his mind."

"He has no share in it, I think," answered Leonardo, after a moment's thought. "He is a man moved solely by his ambition or his interests; and all his interests would have led him to seek this marriage rather than break it off. Not a man in Italy, who seeks to gain a seat upon the hill of power, but looks to the King of France to lend a helping hand, and this breach between his daughter and Lorenzo tends more to Ramiro's

destruction than his elevation. Do you not know some one who has some ancient grudge or desperate enmity towards our young prefect?"

Antonio started as if some one had struck him a blow. The truth, the whole truth, flashed upon his mind at once.

"The villain!" he murmured; "but, to expose him altogether, and to discover all, we must, we must be very careful. I do know such a man, Signor Leonardo; but let us be very secret or we may frighten him. Satan was never more cunning, Moloch more cruel. He was bred up in a school of blood and craft, and we must speak of him in whispers till we can grasp him by the neck. Let us be silent as we pass through the town. There, at your lodgings in the inn, after seeing that all the doors are closed, and no one eaves-dropping around, I will tell you all I know, and leave you to judge if my suspicions are right."



Not a word more was spoken; and as the results of the conversation which took place between them after they reached "the Keys of St. Peter" will be developed hereafter, it were mere waste of time to relate it in this place.

Some words, sad, but true, may, indeed, be noted.

"For our own heart's ease," said Leonardo, "we had better solve all doubts; but yet what skills it? They can never be happy. Lorenzo's rash marriage puts an everlasting bar between them."

"I will not only solve all doubts, but I will punish the traitor," said Antonio; "for, if we let him escape he may do more mischief still. He shall die for his pains, if my own hand does it. But I think I have a better hold on him than that; I will make him over to a stronger hand."

That day came and went. There was a great banquet at the villa of Ramiro d'Orco, which passed as such banquets usually do, and was only marked by one expression of the Countess Visconti when she was led by Leonora through her own private apartments. She was pleased particularly with the beautiful saloon, and the sweet retired garden on the terrace with the steps between.

"Oh! what a charming spot to meet a lover!" she said, gazing laughingly into Leonora's eyes.

"I meet no lover here but my own thoughts," replied Leonora; and the conversation dropped.

The next day every one of distinction was invited to the house of the young countess; and it seemed strange to Leonora to find there several gentlemen, both French and Italian, arrived that day from Rome. They were evidently very intimate with the fair Eloise, but

she was somewhat on her guard, and nothing appeared to shock or offend, although Leonora thought:

“If I had a husband, I would not waste so many smiles on other men.”

Balls, festas, parties of pleasure through the country round succeeded during the ensuing week, chequered but not saddened by the news that there had been hard fighting at Forli, where lay the army of the Duke of Valentinois, assisted by the French under Lorenzo Visconti, and that the town, besieged by them, still held out. Imola had never seen such gay doings; and Leonora, at her father's desire, took part in all the festivities of the time, admired, sought, courted, but apparently indifferent to all. Strange to say she seemed at once to have won the regard, if not the affections of Eloise Visconti. When there was no gay flatterer near her, she must have the society of her beautiful

Leonora; and certainly there was something wonderfully engaging in Eloise when she chose. There might be something in her manner, even apart from her demeanour toward men, which created a doubt, a suspicion in the bosom of a pure-minded woman; but yet it was soon forgotten in her apparent child-like simplicity.

Leonardo da Vinci did not seem to love her; her beauty was not of the style that pleased him, and when asked to paint her portrait he declined, alleging that he had undertaken more than he could accomplish already. His portrait of Leonora made more progress in a week than any work he had ever undertaken. The head was finished, the limbs and the drapery sketched out; but when he had arrived at about the tenth sitting, he requested to have easel and picture both brought down to the citadel, where a large room was assigned to him. It fatigued him, he said, to go to the villa every day; and, having

finished the face and head, the few more sittings which were required could be given him there whenever he found it necessary to ask them. Leonora willingly consented to come at his call; and for several days he worked diligently for nearly twelve hours a day, shut up in the hall where he painted, or in a small room adjoining, where he kept the implements of his art.

It was on Tuesday, the 19th of September, early in the morning, that Leonora received a brief note from the great painter, loosely translatable as follows:

“MOST BEAUTIFUL AND EXCELLENT LADY,—  
Though to your perfections my picture owes an excellence which the painter could never have given from his mere mind, yet there are wants which time and observation have enabled me to detect. Come to me, then, if it be possible, at four this evening, and enable me to supply those

graces which had previously escaped me. Be as beautiful as possible, and, for that object, as gay. Might I commend to you the depth of two fingers' breadths of that fine old Pulciano wine before you come? It heightened your color, I saw, when last you tasted it; and I want a little more of the red in the cheek."

Leonora was punctual to the appointment, and Leonardo, meeting her at the door of the hall, led her round by the back of the picture to the small room I have mentioned, saying, "You must not see it now till it is finished." Then, seating her in a large arm-chair, he stood and gazed at her for a moment, saying, laughingly, "You must be content to be stared at, for I wish to take down every shade of expression in the note-book of my mind, and write it out upon the picture in the other room." After a few minutes, changing her attitude once or twice,

and changing her hair to suit his fancy, he went out into the hall, and engaged himself upon the picture.

For some five minutes Leonora sat in solitude, and all seemed silence through the citadel. Then came some noise in the court-yard below—the clatter of horses' feet and voices speaking; and then some steps upon the flight of stairs which led up to the grand apartments of the castle. All these sounds were so usual, however, that in themselves they could excite no emotion. But yet Leonora turned somewhat pale. There was something in the sound of the step of one of those who mounted the stairs which recalled other days to her mind. It might be heavier, firmer, less elastic, but yet it was very like Lorenzo's tread. Who ever forgets the footstep of one we have loved?

Before she could consider long, Leonardo da Vinci came back to her, and, seeming to have

noticed nothing that went on without, took his place before her, and gazed at her again. He had nearly closed the door behind him, but not quite, and the next moment a step was heard in the adjoining hall, and some one speaking.

"This is the saloon, my lord," said the voice of Antonio, opening the door of the hall. "There it stands; and a master-piece of art it is. I will now tell the Signor Ramiro that you are here; but I will go slowly, so you will have time."

The well-known step sounded across the marble pavement of the hall, at first firm and strong, then less regular, then weak and unsteady.

Next came a silent pause, and Leonora could hear her heart beat in the stillness; and then a voice was raised in lamentation.



"Oh, Leonora! Leonora!" it cried, "had you been but as true as you are beautiful, what misery would you have spared the heart that loved you as never woman before was loved! Had you but told me to pour out the last drop of life's blood in my veins at your feet, you had been kind, not cruel; but you have condemned me to endless tortures for having loved—nay, for loving you still too well!"

Leonardo da Vinci took Leonora's hand as if he would have led her towards the door, but she snatched it from him, and covered her eyes, while her whole frame shook as if with an ague-fit.

The speaker in the hall was silent; but then came once more the sound of steps upon the stairs, and Lorenzo's voice exclaimed, "Oh, God! have they given me but this short moment?" and his steps could be heard retreating towards the door. Then the voice of Ramiro d'Orco was heard saluting him in courteous terms, and the sound died away altogether.

Profound silence reigned in the hall and in the little room adjoining; but at length Leonora took her hands from her eyes, and said, in a mournful and reproachful tone, "If you have done this, you have been very cruel."

"I did it not," answered Leonardo; "but yet I am right glad it has happened. You accuse him of having been faithless to you, he accuses you of having been fickle to him. Both have been betrayed, my child. Both have been true, though both may be wretched."

"But what matters it to either of us?" said Leonora, almost sternly; "the time has passed, the die is cast, and there is no retrieving the fatal throw."

"And yet," said Leonardo da Vinci, "to a fine mind, methinks it must be a grand and noble satisfaction to discover that one we loved, but doubted or condemned, had been accused unjustly—that we have not loved unworthily—

that the high qualities, the noble spirit, the generous, sincere, and tender heart, were not vain dreams of fancy or affection, but steadfast truths of God's own handiwork, which we had revered and loved as the finest gifts of the Almighty Benefactor. You may not feel this now, Leonora, in the bitterness of disappointment, but the time will come when such thoughts will be comfort and consolation to you—when you will glory and feel pride in having loved and been loved by such a man."

Leonora snatched his hand and kissed it warmly. "Thank you," she said, "thank you. To-night or to-morrow I shall have to meet him in public, and your words will give me strength. Now that I know him worthy as I once thought him, I shall glory in his renown, as you have well said; for my Lorenzo's spirit, I feel, is married to mine, though our hands must be for ever disunited. Farewell, my friend, farewell. I

will no longer regret this accident; it has had its bitter, but it has its sweet also;" and, clasping her hands together, she exclaimed almost wildly, "Oh, yes, I am loved, I am loved—still loved!"

She arose from her chair as if to go, but then, catching hold of the tall back, she said, "Let me crave you, Signor Leonardo, bid some of the attendants order my jennet round to the back of the palace. I am wonderfully weak, and I fear my feet would hardly carry me in search of them myself."

"I will go with you to the villa," said Leonardo. "My horse is here below. Sit you still in that chair till I return, and meditate strong thoughts, not weak ones. Pause not on tender recollections, but revolve high designs, and your mind will recover strength, and your body through your mind."

## CHAPTER XI.

OH, what a miserable thing it must be to return to a home, and to find that the heart has none, the fond, true welcome wanting—the welcome of the soul, not the lips. Oh, where is the glad smile! where the cordial greeting! where the abandonment of everything else in the joy of seeing the loved one return! Where, Lorenzo?—where?

'Tis bad enough when we find petty cares and small annoyances thrust upon us the moment our foot passes the threshold—to know that we have been waited for to set right some trivial

wrong, to mend some minute evil, to hear some small complaint — when we have been flying from anxieties and labours, and thirsting for repose and love, to find that the black care, which ever rides behind the horseman, has seated himself at our fireside before we could pull off our boots. 'Tis bad enough—that is bad enough.

But to return to that which ought to be our home, and find every express wish neglected, every warning slighted, every care frustrated and all we have condemned or forbidden, done—that must be painful indeed!

The arrival of Loranzo Visconti in Imola was unexpected; and his short stay with Ramiro d'Orco but served to carry the news to the gay palazzo inhabited by his wife, and create some confusion there. True, when he entered the wide salocns, where she was surrounded by her own admiring crowd, Eloise rose and advanced to meet him, with a light, careless air of inde-

pendence, saying, "Why, my good lord, you have taken us by surprise. We thought you still at the siege of Forli."

"Forli has capitulated, madame," replied Lorenzo, gazing round, and seeing all those whom he wished not to see. "It was too wise to be taken by surprise. But I am dusty with riding—tired too. I will retire, take some repose, and change my apparel."

Thus saying, he left the room. Eloise made no pretence of following him; and, as he closed the door, he could hear her light laugh at a jest—perhaps at himself—from some of her gay attendants.

Oh, how his heart sickened as, led by Antonio, he trod the way to the apartments of his wife!

"Leave me, Antonio," he said, "and return in an hour. There, busy not yourself with the apparel. Heaven knows whether I shall want it. Leave me, I say!"

"When you have leisure, my lord, I would fain speak a word or two in your private ear," said Antonio; "you rode so fast upon the road I could not give you some information I have obtained."

"Regarding whom?" asked Lorenzo, with a frowning brow; "your lady?"

"No, my lord, regarding the Signora d'Orco," replied the man.

But Lorenzo merely waved his hand for him to depart; and when he was gone, pressed his hands upon his burning temples, and sat gazing on the ground. His head swam; his heart ached; his mind was irresolute. In his own soul he compared Leonora d'Orco with Eloise de Chaumont. He asked himself if, fickle as she had shown herself to be, Leonora, once his wife, would have received him so on his return from labour and dangers.

He remembered the days of old, and answered



the question readily. But then he turned to bitterer and more terrible inquiries. Was his wife faithful to him? or was he but the butt and ridicule of those whom, contrary to his plainest injunctions, she had brought from Rome?

He was of no jealous disposition. By nature he was frank and confiding; but her conduct had been such—was such, that those comments, so hard to bear—those suspicions, that sting more terribly than scorpions, had been busy round his ears even at the court of France.

In vain he had remonstrated, in vain had he used authority. He found her now, as he had left her in Rome, lighter than vanity itself. That accident, propinquity, and some interest in the accident she had brought upon him, with the vanity of winning one who had been considered cold and immoveable, had induced her to give him what little love she could bestow on any one, and confirm it with her hand, he had long

known. Long, too, had he repented of his rash marriage; but that carelessness of all things, that weariness of the world, that longing for repose, even were it the repose of the grave, which Leonora's fancied fickleness had brought upon him, had not been removed by his union with Eloise de Chaumont. A thousand evils had been added—evils the more terrible to a proud, high mind. He had never expected much; but he had believed Eloise innocent, though thoughtless; tender and affectionate, though light. But he had not found the tenderness after the ring was on her finger; and the very semblance of affection had soon died away.

“What was there on earth worth living for?” he asked himself; “what was there to compensate the pangs he endured—the burden he bore. Nothing—nothing. Life was only not a blank because it was full of miseries.”

Thus he sat, with a wrung heart and whirling brain, for nearly half an hour. At length he took a picture from his bosom—one of those small gems of art which the great painters of that and the preceding age sometimes took a pride in producing—and gazed upon it earnestly. It was the portrait of a very beautiful woman (his own mother), which the reader has seen him receive from Milan. He thought it like Leonora d'Orco; but oh! that mother was faithful and true unto the death. She had defended her own honor, she had protected herself from shame, she had escaped the power of a tyrant, by preferring the grave to pollution.

He turned to the back of the picture, now repaired, and read the inscription on it, "A cure for the ills of life."

"And why not my cure?" asked Lorenzo of his own heart; "why should I not pass from misery and shame even as my mother did?"

He pressed the spring, and the lid flew open. There were the fatal powders beneath, all ready to his hand.

He was seated in his wife's room, and among many an article of costly luxury on the table were a small silver cup and water-pitcher. Lorenzo stretched out his hand to take the cup, laying the portrait with the powders down while he half filled the cup with water. But, ere he could take a powder from the case, Antonio re-entered.

"The hour has passed, my lord, and I do hope you will now hear me," he said. "I have to tell you that which, perhaps, may be of little comfort, but is yet important for you to know."

"Speak on, my good Antonio," said Lorenzo, in a gentler tone than he had lately used; for the thoughts of death were still upon him, and to the wretched there is gentleness in the thoughts of death. "What is it you would say? I am

in no haste;" and he set down the cup upon the table by the picture.

"My lord, we have been all terribly deceived," said Antonio; "you, I, the Signora Leonora—all. While you have thought her false and fickle, she has believed you the same."

"Antonio!" exclaimed his lord in a reproachful tone, "Antonio, forbear. Try not to deceive me by fictions."

"My lord, I stake my life upon the truth of what I say," replied Antonio. "I have seen a maid whom she hired in Florence after the rest had left her—those who were carried away from the Villa Morelli and never heard of more. I had my suspicions; and, after having won her good graces, I questioned the girl closely. Signora d'Orco wrote to you often—sent letters by any courier that was going to France—wept at your silence—pined, and nearly died."

"But I wrote often," said Lorenzo.

"Your letters never reached her, nor hers you," replied the man; "by a base trick—"

"But her handwriting!" exclaimed Lorenzo, "her own handwriting! I saw it--read it."

"I know not what that handwriting implied, my lord," was the answer; "but perhaps, if you were to examine it closely, you might find either that it was not hers, or that, thinking you false and forsworn, she wrote in anger, as you have spoken and thought of her."

Lorenzo meditated deeply, and then murmured, "It may be so. O God! if this be true!"

"It is true, my lord, by my salvation," replied Antonio; "I have the whole clue in my hands. The Signor Leonardo da Vinci, too, knows all, and can satisfy you better than I can."

"Is he here?" asked Lorenzo, in a tone of melancholy interest, remembering the happy

hours at Belgiojosa. "If he be convinced, there must be some truth in it. But tell me, Antonio, what fiend has done this? It cannot surely be Ramiro d'Orco?"

"Oh no," replied the man; "but ask me no more, my lord, at present. See the Signor Leonardo. He and I have worked together to discover all, and he will tell you all. Well may you call the man a fiend; but I am on his traces, like a staghound, and I will have my fangs in his flanks ere long. Let the maestro tell you all, however. I only wished to let you know the truth, as the Signora Leonora is even now with her father below, and you must meet her presently. You could not meet the faithless as the faithful; and she is true to you, my lord—has been ever true."

Lorenzo started up. "Leonora here!" he exclaimed; "I must see her—I will see her. Where leads that door, Antonio?"

"To the room reserved for your lordship's toilet," replied the man.

"Quick! send my varlets up," cried the master; "I will but shake off this dust and go down."

"Better appear as becomes you, my noble lord," replied Antonio; "there is a splendid company below—indeed, there always is when the countess receives her guests. Your apparel is all put forth and ready. To dress will but take you a few minutes."

"Well, be it so," said Lorenzo; "bring me those lights, my good Antonio;" and he walked straight to the door of the dressing-room, leaving his mother's portrait and the poison on the table. He remembered it once while going down the stairs after dressing, but there was too much eagerness in his heart for him to return to take it then, and from that moment events and—more engrossing still—feelings hurried on so



rapidly, he forgot entirely his purpose of going back for the portrait at an after period.

The entrance of the young prefect into his wife's splendid saloons caused no slight movement among the many guests there present. His noble and dignified carriage, the strange air of command in one so young—an air of command obtained as much by sorrows endured, and a manly struggle against despair, as by the habit of authority—impressed all the strangers in the room with a feeling going somewhat beyond mere respect. But there was one there present whose feelings cannot be described. He was to her, as it were, a double being—the Lorenzo of the past, the Lorenzo of the present. The change in personal appearance was very slight, though the youth had become the man. The dark, brown curling beard, the greater breadth of the shoulders, the powerful development of every limb, and perhaps some increase of height,

formed the only material change, while the grace as well as the dignity was still there. In the ideal Lorenzo—the Lorenzo of her imagination—the change was, of course, greater to the eyes of Leonora. He was no longer her own—he was no longer her lover—he was the husband of another—there was an impassable barrier between them; but that day had diminished the difference. She now knew that he was as noble as ever, that he had not been untrue to her without cause, that he had loved her faithfully, painfully, sorrowfully (she dared not let her mind dwell on the thought that he loved her still); and there was a sort of a tie between her heart and his, between the present and the past, produced by undeserved grief mutually endured.

Oh! how she longed to tell him that she had never been faithless to him—that she had loved him ever! Again, she did not dare to admit that she loved him still.

Yet she commanded herself wonderfully. She had come prepared; and she had long obtained the power of concealing her emotions. That she felt and suffered was only known to one in the whole room. She clung more tightly to her father's arm, her fingers pressed more firmly on it; and Ramiro d'Orco felt all she endured, and imagined more. He said not a word indeed to comfort or console her, but there were words spoken in his own heart which would have had a very different effect if they had found breath.

"The day of vengeance is coming," he thought — "is coming fast;" but his aspect betrayed no emotion.

Lorenzo took his way straight to where the Lord of Imola and his daughter stood, close by the side of his own wife; and Eloise laughed with a gay, careless laugh, as she saw the sparkle in her husband's eyes.

"This is my friend, the Signora d'Orco," she said; but Lorenzo took Leonora's hand at once, saying, "I have long had the happiness of knowing her;" and he added (aloud, though in a somewhat sad and softened tone) words which had only significance for her; they were: "I have known her long, though not as well as I should have known her."

He stood and spoke with Leonora herself for some moments. He referred no farther to the past, for the icy touch of her hand on that warm night told him plainly enough that she was agitated as far as she could endure, and he strove to diminish that agitation rather than increase it.

He then turned to Ramiro d'Orco, saying, "My Lord of Imola, I will beseech you to go with me through the rooms, and introduce me to the noble gentlemen and ladies of your city."

Ramiro d'Orco was all graciousness, and led him from one to another, while Eloise with some malice, whispered in Leonora's ear :

"He is marvellously handsome is he not? When you were standing together the Count de Rouvri whispered me that you were the two most beautiful personages in Italy."

"He is a poor judge and a poor courtier," replied Leonora; and the conversation dropped.

She had now fully recovered her composure, and she thanked God that the trying moment was over. Numbers flocked round her, gay words and pleasant devices passed, and all that fine wit for which the Italians were famous, displayed itself. Nor did Leonora do her part amiss, although it must be owned her thoughts sometimes wandered, and her words were once or twice somewhat wide of the mark.

At length the prefect and Ramiro d'Orco returned, and then began arrangements for the

following day. It seemed understood that on alternate nights the Lord of Imola and the lady of the prefect should entertain the nobility of the city and the district round, and their meeting for the following evening had been fixed for rather an early hour at the villa on the hill, before Lorenzo's unexpected arrival at Imola. Eloise, however, who was not without her caprices, thought fit to change the arrangement, declared that she was weary of so much gaiety, felt herself somewhat indisposed, and would prefer a day of rest, if it were not inconvenient to the Signor d'Orco to postpone his festa till the following day.

Ramiro d'Orco declared that, on the contrary, the change would be convenient to him, for that he was bound to go, either on the morrow or the day after, to hold a court of high justiciary at a small town just within his vicariate, and that he could not return the same night.

"I will set out to-morrow, my lord," he said, "and shall be back early on the following day. In the mean time, I must leave my daughter here to do the honors of the city to you and your fair lady; and if she fails in any point, she shall be well rated at my return."

Thus saying, he and Leonora took their leave; but the festivities in Lorenzo's house continued long. He himself was present to the last, although his presence certainly did not throw much gaiety upon the scene. To the citizens of Imola he was attentive and courteous, but to the crowd of butterflies who had followed Eloise from Rome, without being repulsive, he was cold and distant. When the last guest was gone, he and his wife took their several ways, she to her chamber, he to his dressing-room; and, long after she had retired to rest, she heard her husband's voice conversing eagerly with Antonio.

"Talking over my foibles, I suppose," said Eloise to herself; "I wish I could hear what they say;" and she raised herself up in bed to go towards the door, but she felt weary, and her natural indifference got the better of her curiosity. She sank back upon her pillow, and soon was buried in sleep.

The conversation of which she had heard the murmur had no reference to herself. Lorenzo questioned his humble friend in regard to the facts he had mentioned in the earlier part of the evening, and many and varied were the feelings which the intelligence he received produced—deep and bitter regret, some self-reproval, and a sensation which would have resembled despair had not a sort of dreamy, moonlight joy, to know that he had been still beloved, pervaded all his thoughts with a cold but soothing light. He sought to know on whom the suspicions of Antonio and Leonardo fixed as the agent of all



his misery, but the good man refused to satisfy him.

"Leave him to me, my lord," he said; "I have means of dealing with him which you have not. I will only beseech you tell me how long the great Duke of Valentinois remains at Forli, and to give me leave to absent myself for a day or two at any time I may think fit."

"Oh, that you have, of course," replied Lorenzo. "Did I ever restrain you, Antonio? As to Borgia, he will most probably remain a month at Forli. I left him as soon as the place capitulated; for I love him not, although my good cousin, King Louis, is so fond of him. Well, policy, like necessity, too often brings the base and the noble together. But, as the capitulation imported that the town would surrender, if not relieved, in three days, and I know that De Vitry is on his march with three thousand men, which will render relief impossible, I thought I might

very well leave this good lord duke to watch the city by himself. He is an extraordinary, a great, and a mighty man, but as bad a man as ever the world produced—unless it be his father.”

“That will do right well,” replied Antonio; “I neither love him nor hate him, for my part but I must use him for my purposes.”

“He generally uses other men for his,” answered his lord, with a doubtful look.

“Great stones are moved by great levers,” said Antonio; “and I have got the lever in my hands, my lord, with which I can move this mighty man to do well-nigh what I wish. I will set out to-morrow evening, I think, and ride by night—no, it must be on the following day. There is a game playing even now upon which I must have my eye. In the mean time, your lordship had better see the Signor Leonardo; he will tell you much; and if there be a lingering

doubt, as there well may be, that your poor servant has ascertained the facts he states beyond a doubt, the maestro will confirm all I have said."

"Antonio," said Lorenzo, giving him his hand, "if ever there was a man who faithfully loved and served another, so you have loved and served me. But love and service are sometimes blind and dull. Not such have been yours. Where I have wanted wisdom, perception, or discretion, you have furnished them to me; and of all the many benefits conferred on me by Lorenzo de Medici, his placing you near me was the greatest. Power, and wealth, and authority are often irritable, and sometimes unjust. If I have ever shown myself so to you, Antonio, forgive me for it; but never believe that, knowing you as I know you, I ever doubt your truth."

Antonio made no reply, but kissed his lord's hand, as was the custom in those reverent ages, and left him with a swimming eye.

Lorenzo cast from him the gorgeous dress at that time common in Italy, the gorgeous chain of gold, the knightly order of St. Michael, the surcoat of brown and gold, the vest and haut-de-chaussee of white satin and silver, and, after plunging his burning head several times in water, cast on a loose dressing-gown, and, seating himself in a wide easy-chair, endeavoured to sleep. The day had been one of fatigue and excitement. Neither mind nor body had enjoyed any repose, but sleep was long a stranger to his eyelids. At length she came, fanning his senses with her downy wings, but only as a vampire, to wound his heart while she seemed to soothe. He dreamed of Eloise. He saw her dying by the dagger-blow of a hand issuing from a cloud. All was forgotten—indignation, anger shame, I may say contempt. She was his wife, the wife of his bosom, the wife plighted to him by the solemn vow of the altar. He seized the

visionary hand, uplifted for a second blow, and pushed it back, exclaiming, "No, no, strike me! If any one must die, strike me!" and then he woke.

The lights which he had left burning were nearly in the sockets. The first blue gleam of morning was seen through the windows; and Lorenzo, dressing himself quietly in his ordinary garments, descended to the court-yard, endeavouring to forget the troublous visions of the night.

## CHAPTER XII.

UNDER a wide-spreading and drooping fig-tree in the lower part of the gardens of the villa on the hill was seated a man who kept his eyes steadily fixed upon a certain spot at the end of the terrace far above. The distance in a direct line to the object toward which his eyes were turned was some two hundred and fifty yards; it might be a little more, but at all events, he could see distinctly all that passed above.

At first it seemed as if there was but little to be seen. A lady was seated, reading, in a small

plot or garden, close by a highly-ornamented doorway which led into the interior of the villa. It was in an angle of the building, where a large mass of architecture protruded beyond the general façade. Thus, when the sun was in the west, a deeper shade was cast there than upon any other point of the terrace. It was, perhaps, that the sun had nearly reached the horizon, and that the shades of night were coming fast, which caused the lady to lay the manuscript book upon her knee, and, looking up to the sky, seem to contemplate a flight of tinted clouds, which looked like the leaves of a shedding rose blown over a garden by the rifling wind.

But hark! what is that sound that strikes his ear? the fast footfalls of horses coming along the road beneath the stone walls of the garden. They pause close by him.

"Here! hold the horse, and wait till I return," said a voice, and the next moment

a cavalier vaulted over the wall, and stood within twenty yards of where the watcher sat.

For a moment the stranger seemed uncertain which way to turn, but then he forced his way through the vines to a path which led up to the main entrance of the villa on the terrace. He looked up and around from time to time as he ascended; but suddenly an object seemed to meet his eyes to the right, and, striking away from the path, he took a course direct toward it, regardless of any obstacle. The watcher kept his eye upon him while he climbed the hill, mounted the steps of the terrace, and stood by the lady's side.

Who can tell what words were spoken?  
Who can tell what feelings were expressed?  
Who can tell what memories were re-awakened?  
Who can tell what passions had power in that hour?



The watcher saw him stand beside her talking for several minutes, then cast himself down on the ground by her side. A moment after, his arm glided round her; and one could almost fancy that wafted on the air came the words, "One—one kiss before we part."

Their lips evidently met, and God forgive them if it was a sin! The next instant Leonora rose from her seat, and, hand in hand, they entered the building by the door which led to her own saloon.

"Ha! ha!" said the watcher, with a bitter laugh. But two minutes had not elapsed before lights flashed from the windows of that very room, and the shadows of three figures passed across.

"What means this?" said the man who sat beneath the fig-tree; and, creeping forth from his concealment, he stole up the hill. He reached the terrace at some distance from the

little garden, and then walked along in the direction of the spot where he had seen Lorenzo and Leonora. His sandaled foot made very little noise; and he kept so close to the building that his gown brushed against the stone-work. When he reached the first window of Leonora's saloon, he paused for an instant, and by an effort—for he was short of stature—raised himself sufficiently to look in. It was enough. Seated side by side were those whom the Count de Rouvri had well termed the two most beautiful persons in Italy. But at the farther side of the saloon was one of Leonora's maids busily plying the needle.

Had Eve refused to taste the forbidden fruit in Eden, Satan could hardly have felt more rancorous disappointment than that friar experienced at what he saw.

That night passed, and the following day; but when evening came, the villa on the hill

blazed with lights; the gardens were illuminated, and gay groups were seen in the long saloons and on the terrace, and in many a part of the gardens. Many a tale of love was told that night, and many a whispered word was spoken that decided fates for ever. There was much pleasure, much joy, some happiness; but there were pains and heart-burning also.

It was toward the end of the entertainment that Eloise, passing along with the young Marquis de Vibraye at her side, came suddenly upon her husband leaning against one of the pillars of the door which led out upon the terrace. De Vibraye was one of those peculiarly obnoxious to Lorenzo, for there was a braggart spirit in him which sported with woman's fame in the society of men with little heed of truth or probability. There was a look of triumph on his face as he passed Lorenzo with hardly an inclination of the head. But he went not far; for

his foot was not on the terrace ere Lorenzo's hand was on his shoulder.

"A word with you, seigneur," said the young prefect, and drew him to some distance.

"Well, my lord," said De Vibraye, with a cheek somewhat pale, "what do you want with me?"

"But little," replied Lorenzo. "I gave you a sufficient hint in Rome that your society was not desired within my doors. I find you here. If you are in Imola to-morrow at noon, I will cut off your ears, and turn you out of the gates as a worthless cur. You had better go while you are safe."

He waited no answer, but returned to the side of his wife, who greeted him in a fretful tone, saying,

"Well, this is courteous in you two gentlemen to leave me standing here alone like a chambermaid!"

"Madame, you shall be alone no longer," answered Lorenzo, drawing her arm through his, and leading her back into the great saloon.

She did not venture to resist, for he spoke in a tone she had heard once before, and she knew that when he used it he would bear no opposition. But a few minutes after, a cry ran through the rooms that the Countess Visconti had fainted.

"Bear her to my daughter's saloon!" cried Ramiro d'Orco, as Lorenzo caught up Eloise in his arms; "bear her to my daughter's saloon! She will soon recover. Here, follow me—make way, gentlemen! All the lady requires is cooler air; the rooms are too crowded."

"This way, Signor Visconti," said Leonora; and in a few moments, Eloise was laid upon a couch, and the door closed to prevent the intrusion of the crowd.

It was very like death; and Lorenzo and

Leonora looked upon her with strange and mingled sensations. There lay the only obstacle to their happiness, pale and ashy as a faded flower. Seldom has the slumber of the grave been better mocked; and yet the sight had a saddening and heart-purifying effect on both. So young—so beautiful—so sweet and innocent-looking in that still sleep! They could not, they did not wish that so bright a link in the chain which bound both to the pillar of an evil destiny should be rudely severed. The maids who had been called tried in vain to bring her back to consciousness; and Ramiro d'Orco, who had been gazing too with sensations differing from any in the breasts of those around him, called the girls aside, and bade them seek the friar.

“He is skilled in medicinal arts,” he said; “fetch him instantly.”

Leonora pointed to the inanimate form of her lover's wife, and said in a low tone,

"Look there, Lorenzo ! Is it not sad? There is but one thing to be done. I will take refuge in a convent, lest evil dreams should come into our hearts."

"O forbear ! forbear yet awhile!" said Lorenzo ; but, ere he could add more, Ramiro d'Orco had returned to their side ; and a few minutes after, Friar Peter was in the room. He approached the couch with a quiet, stealthy step, gazed on the face of Eloise, laid his hand upon the pulse, and, taking a cup of water from one of the maids, dropped some pale fluid into it from a vial, and, raising the head of his patient, poured it into her mouth.

"She will revive in a moment," he said ; "that is a sovereign cure for such affections of this bodily frame. Oppression of the spirit may be harder to reach, and, I should think, in this case there is something weighing heavy on the heart or mind."

Lorenzo kept silence, though he thought that the friar had perhaps divined aright.

At all events, his remedy, whatever it was, proved effectual. After about a minute, Eloise opened her eyes, and looked around her faintly. "Where am I?" she said. "Oh, is that you, Leonora?"

"How are you, madame," said Ramiro d'Orco; "you have swooned from the crowded rooms and overheated air. I trust you will be quite well shortly."

"I am better," she said, "much better, but very weak; I would fain go home. Let some one bring my litter."

"I will go with you," said Lorenzo. "I beseech you, signor, have my horses ordered. But, ere we go, I must thank this good friar for his most serviceable aid. That for your convent, father," he said, drawing him aside and giving him money. "I thank you for your skilful tend-



ance on my wife; but I think that perhaps your counsels might, as you hinted even now, be as good for her mental condition as your drugs have been for her bodily health. I will pray you, therefore, good father, visit her to-morrow towards noon. You can explain your coming as a visit to a patient rather than a penitent; but if you can inspire her with somewhat more careful thought regarding her demeanour in the world, you will do well."

“But the lady knows not yet that I tended on her,” said Mardocchi; “let me speak with her again before she goes.”

He then approached the side of Eloise, and once more laid his fingers on her pulse.

“Not quite recovered yet,” he said, with a grave air; “give me some water. A few more drops will, I trust, complete the cure, daughter;” and he took the vial from his gown.

“Not here, friar—not here!” whispered Ramiro d’Orco.

But Mardocchi put him back with his hand, dropped out some more of the liquid, and gave it to Eloise, saying,

“This will restore you perfectly for to-night. To-morrow I will see you again, to know how you are then.”

It was on the following day toward noon that Friar Peter entered the Episcopal Square, and approached the palace which had been hired for Lorenzo Visconti. He walked with downcast eyes and a thoughtful look, but none of the towns-people who passed him attributed any very high or holy meditations to the friar; for the Italians, especially of the lower class, are the most clear-sighted persons in the world into the depths of human character. “What is he calculating?” they thought; “what is he scheming now?”

With a quiet, almost noiseless step, he approached the wide gates of the palazzo, and asked for the signora.

"She is in the hall above with some French cavaliers, father," replied the janitore; "you can go up."

"I would rather see her alone," answered the friar; "I attended upon her last night when she fainted at the Villa Ramiro, and wish to speak to her about her health. Can you not call her out of the hall for a moment?"

The porter led him to the door of the hall, and, leaving him there, entered alone. He was gone but a moment, and then returning, led the friar up another flight of stairs to Eloise's chamber, where he left him, saying that his lady would be up in a few minutes.

He closed the door when he departed, and Mardocchi gazed around him with no small curiosity and interest. There were many ornaments scattered round the room—little works of art, beautiful trifles and invaluable gems. Mardocchi remarked all, examined all, and handled

not a few. Among the rest he took up the small picture of Lorenzo's mother, which the young prefect had left there on the night of his arrival. He gazed at the face in a moment or two, seeming to have some faint remembrance of the features, and then examined the case with some curiosity. He was not long in discovering the spring by which the back opened, and the powders and inscriptions were exposed to view.

"A cure for the ills of life!" he said; and then, as if something which required thought suddenly struck him, he seated himself, and with his eyes fixed upon the case, fell into profound meditation.

The reader will remember that there was a smaller chamber next to that of Eloise, and a door of communication between the two. As the friar sat there thinking, that door moved slightly on its hinges, and a chink appeared

through which one might have passed a Spanish crown piece,—no larger.

A few minutes after, the countess entered. Mardocchi had the picture with the case still open in his hand; but he laid it not down as might have been expected. On the contrary, he rose from his seat, and, bowing his head, said, with a humble air:

“I have committed a great indiscretion, Madonna. I took up this beautiful portrait to look at it, when suddenly, I know not how, it came open as you see.”

“Oh! that is the picture of my husband's mother,” said Eloise carelessly; “I found it here two or three days ago. I cannot tell how it came here, for he carries it usually in his bosom. But what is that little box behind? I was puzzling over these powders and the inscription only yesterday, but could make nothing of them.”

"Let me see," said Mardocchi, carrying the case to the window, as if for a better light.

He remained for a moment or two with his back to the lady, apparently examining the powders, and then brought the case back, saying:

"They are apparently love powders."

"Then I will take one of them," said Eloise, laughing; "I am sure I need them."

"For Heaven's sake, forbear, Madonna," said Mardocchi; "I don't know what they are—I only guess. God help us! they may contain poison in this wicked age."

"Well, well, I will put the case back in his dressing-room," said Eloise; but the friar stayed her, saying, "Better leave them where he left them, my daughter. I have but a few moments to stay, and I wish to enquire after your health"

"Oh! my health is excellent, good father,"

replied the lady, lightly, "thanks to your skill; I believe it never was better."

"Permit me to feel your pulse, Madonna," said Mardocchi. "Let me see. This is the ninth day of the moon; and, from the eight to the fourteenth, some mild and calming remedies are useful. Your pulse is somewhat agitated."

"Well, it may be," said Eloise; "my husband is in a mighty sweet humour, father. He takes offence at the slightest trifles; and, on my life, if I did not know him noble at heart, I should think, as you said, that these papers contained poisons, and that he had left them here that I might try their virtues myself."

"That were easily tested," said Mardocchi, with an eager look. "Give one of them to some of your maids; bid them put it in a piece of meat, and throw it to a dog. If they be

venomous the venom will soon do its work. Here, give her this one at the top;" and, taking one of the powders out of the case, he laid it down on the table.

"And now, again, Madonna, as to your health," continued Mardocchi; "you are not so well as you think yourself. A malady affects you proceeding from some shock to the spirits, which will return at intervals of sixteen hours, unless you do something to arrest its course. It may be very violent indeed, and attended with sore pains and terrible suffering; but I can prevent its having any fatal effect. Let me calculate. Last night you had the first slight attack at about ten o'clock; a stronger one will seize you at two to-day. It is now too late to avert it entirely; but if, in an hour's time, you will take this powder which I now give you—mind! do not confound it with the other, which is to be tried upon the dog—you will find the paroxysms



much mitigated. Do not be alarmed, though you may suffer much, for, at the moment when the convulsion seems most strong, it will suddenly cease, and you will sleep quietly."

Eloise gazed at him with surprise and even alarm.

"I feel quite well," she thought; "what can this mean? And yet I felt quite well five minutes before I fainted last night. Well, the monk soon cured me then, and I will follow his council now. In an hour father, did you say?" she asked aloud.

"Ay, in an hour," replied the friar; "that will just give me time to try one of those other powders on a dog. I shall like to hear the result, and will see you again to-morrow, when I trust I shall find this malady is quite vanquished. You then can tell whether those in the case are safe. They are probably very idle drugs."

"I will have them tried, good father," replied Eloise; "and now farewell."

"Shall I send one of your women to you, Madonna?" asked the friar; and then he added with apparently a sudden change of thought "It may be as well not to say how you came by the powders, or why you wish this trial made. It might lead to injurious suspicions."

"True—true," said Eloise, in an absent tone. "I will say nothing. Send one of them here. You will find them in the end room of the suite. Farewell."

Mardocchi left her, and speedily found the chamber where her women were at work. His quick eye glanced over them, and fixed upon one he thought suited to his purpose.

"I wish to speak to you, signora," he said, beckoning her into the corridor; and when she

laid down her work and followed him, he added in a low tone, "The countess wants you in her chamber. She may say little to you in her present mood, and therefore I wish to warn you to be careful what you do. Her husband has left her some powders to take. She is doubtful of what they are, and wishes to have one of them tried upon a dog before she swallows them. Give it in some meat, and don't lose sight of the animal till you see the effect. Then return to your lady, and tell her what you have seen. But talk with her as little as possible, for she is unwell."

In the meanwhile, Eloise sat alone in somewhat sad and solemn meditations. If there be sympathies between the beings of this mortal world and those unclogged with clay—if there be warnings conveyed without voice, or impulses given from a higher sphere, it is natural to suppose that they are more clearly heard, more

keenly felt, when we are approaching near the world from which they come. Eloise was very sad—the lightness of her character was gone. She was serious now for once, and thoughts unwonted, undesired, had full possession of her.

Who is there that can review even a few years of his past life without finding many things to regret? And oh! what a sad retrospect did the last two years afford to Eloise Visconti! How many an act worthy of penitence, if not remorse—how many a blessing cast away—how many an opportunity neglected!

She tried to shake off that painful, self-reproachful mood; but it clung to her; and when the woman entered, she hardly saw her.

“What are your commands, Madonna?” asked the girl.

Eloise started, and then, taking one of two small packets which lay at some distance

from each other on the table, she held it out, saying—

“Put that in a piece of meat, and give it to one of the dogs. Come back and tell me if it lives or dies.”

The girl took the paper and departed, but not without remarking that there was another packet of much the same shape and size upon the table.

Eloise fell into thought again, and was soon as completely absorbed in meditation as ever. She knew not how long the girl was absent; but at length she returned, saying, with a look of some consternation—

“Madam, the poor dog fell into great agonies and died in about three minutes.”

“Ha!” said the young countess; “thank God! I now know what they are.”

“I thank God too, Madonna,” answered the girl; “how can any one be so cruel?”

"Cruel or kind, as the case may be, Giovannetta," replied her mistress, "when life is a burden, be his kind who takes it off our shoulders."

"But oh! Madonna, for a husband to—" said the girl.

But Eloise waved her away, saying, "Go, girl, go; you know not what you talk of. Leave me!"

The girl went unwillingly, for she liked not the change from light-hearted mirth to stern sadness in her gay mistress; and she would fain have taken the other powder with her, but she dared not disobey.

"What means this deep gloom that is upon me?" said Eloise to herself, as soon as the girl was gone. "It must be the approach of the attack the friar mentioned. It is time to take the medicine—nay, more than time, I fear. I will swallow it at once, though I love not

drugs. This at least has life in it—not death;” and, with that conviction, she mixed the powder Mardocchi had left with some water, and drank it.

“It is very sweet,” she said, “but it burns my throat;” and, seating herself, she took up a book of prayers and began to read.

Ten minutes after the silver bell rang violently once and again, for the maids heard not the first summons. At the second, Giovanetta started up and ran to the chamber of her mistress; but, as she approached, she heard the sound of a heavy fall, and when the door was opened, she and another who followed found Eloise upon the floor in strong convulsions.

“Oh, she is poisoned!” cried Giovanetta, wringing her hands.

“My husband! my husband!” murmured Eloise, with a terrible effort: “my husband;

tell him I never sinned against him as he thought—tell him I have been faithful to him—oh, girls, raise me up! I am choked—I cannot breathe.”

They raised her and laid her on her bed, and for a moment or two she seemed relieved; but then a still more terrible paroxysm succeeded, and, ere any assistance could be sought, the light, thoughtless spirit passed away to seek mercy at the throne of God.



## CHAPTER XIII.

IN the court-yard of the castle of Imola were many horses and attendants, and in the great hall various personages of high and low degree. A scene very frequent in ancient and modern time, and which never loses its terrors, was there going on. It was the trial of a man accused of a capital offence. The lord of Imola, possessing, as he had stipulated, what was then called high and low justice, sat upon the raised seat at the end of the hall, and by his side appeared the young Prefect of Romagna, whom he had asked to assist him by his advice in a case which

seemed to present some difficulties. The hour was about twenty minutes after noon, and the testimony had all been taken.

Before the tribunal stood a man, between two guards, of some forty years of age, and of a ferocious aspect. But his cheek was pale, and his eye dim with fear; for he had heard it distinctly proved that he had been taken in the act of a cold-blooded brutal assassination of a young girl.

"I refuse this tribunal," he cried, hoarsely. "I do not acknowledge the power of this court. I am of noble blood, as every one here knows; and you have no authority to sentence me, Ramiro d'Orco."

"What say you, my lord prefect?" asked Ramiro, in his cold, quiet tones. "I leave you to pass sentence."

"I can but give an opinion, my lord," replied Lorenzo; "I presume to pass no sentence within

your vicariate. You have, I know, power of high justice; therefore his claim of nobility in your court can avail him nothing, except in giving him the right to the axe rather than the cord. His guilt is clear. His sentence must, I presume, be death."

"I will order him at once to the block," said Ramiro, sternly.

But Lorenzo interposed.

"Nay, give him time," he said; "I beseech you give him time. Death is a terrible thing to all men, even to those who have lived the purest lives; but, from what we have heard, this unhappy man's soul is loaded with many a crime. Give him time for thought, for counsel, for repentance. Abridge not the period of religious comfort. Send him not hot from the bloody deed before the throne of the Almighty Judge."

"How long?" asked Ramiro, somewhat impatiently.

"Allow him four-and-twenty hours for preparation," said Lorenzo. "It is short enough."

"So be it," said Ramiro d'Orco; "take him hence. Let him have a priest to admonish him; and at this hour to-morrow, do him to death in the court-yard by the axe. My lord prefect, will you ride with me? Our horses are all ready, and I have again to leave the city for a few hours. There are some curious things of the olden time by the road side."

"Willingly," answered Lorenzo, "if we can be back before night, for I expect, from day to day, intelligence from the Duke of Valentinois, now lying before Forli."

Ramiro d'Orco assured him that their return would be before sunset; and, descending to the court-yard, they mounted and rode out of the Ravenna gate. Each was followed by numerous well-armed servants, and, whether by accident or design, their trains were very equal in numbers.

In the mean time, the unhappy criminal cast himself down upon a bench, and fell into a fit of despairing thought. Even among the hardest and harshest of the human race, there lingers long a certain feeling of compassion for intense misery; but yet it is not probable that the guards and attendants of Ramiro d'Orco would have suffered the murderer to sit quietly there, had they not been moved by an inclination to talk over the various events of the day, and hear the scandal of the town and neighbourhood.

The Italian is very fond of scandal; but he loves it not for the sake of the coarse enjoyment which many others feel in feeding on the follies of their kind, but rather for the exercise of the fine-edged wit, the keen but delicate sarcasm of his nation, to which it gives an ample field. Even the hard men there present had each his slight smile, and his light and playful jest at the subject of their discourse.

Alas! that subject was the fair wife of Lorenzo Visconti and her train of French and Roman cavaliers.

They had not been thus engaged five minutes, when suddenly a door just behind the seat of judgment opened, and the friar, Father Peter, entered, looking eagerly round. The wit and the jest ceased instantly, and the men looked at him in silence, with no very loving aspect. None had any tangible cause of dislike; but men have antipathies instinctive, deeply seated, not to be resisted.

With his still noiseless step Mardocchi advanced, stepped down, and asked where Ramiro d'Orco was. They told him that their lord had gone forth by the Ravenna gate, and his countenance fell. He said little, however, for he was very careful of his words; and, after having gazed at the murderer—the only one who seemed to take no notice of him—he withdrew by the great

door. At the head of the staircase he paused and meditated for several minutes, then descended into the court and sought the great gates. He there halted again, and muttered to himself—

“Well, no matter? It may be as well that at first there should seem no suspicion. It will look more natural. Slight causes at first, and then graver doubts, and then formal inquiries, and then damning proofs. That were the best course. But this Signor d’Orco of mine is so thirsty for his blood, it has been difficult to restrain him hitherto, and he may hurry on too fiercely. As well he should not know the thing till night. She will be dead by two; by five or six they will be home, and in the interval between I shall have time to prepare the public mind for the tale of poison—without hinting at her husband, however. Let that come afterwards.”

But Mardocchi's plans were destined to be disappointed, in part at least. He was not allowed time to prepare the public mind, as he proposed; for though, from a vulgar assassin, he had risen by skill and assiduous study to be something like a politician, and his schemes were often deep and well laid, yet the finest politicians must often be the slaves of circumstances, and sometimes their own cupidity frustrates their best devised projects.

Friar Peter reached what was called the little piazza, and stopped for a moment to speak with one of the Roman gentlemen who had followed Eloise Visconti to Imola. The nobleman asked the monk several questions in a low voice. "I really know not what is the lady's malady," said Mardocchi at length, following out his purpose; "I should say it is the effect of a slow poison, but that I know no one has any cause to put her out of the way."



"Be not too sure of that," replied the other; "she left us in a very sudden way to-day, and the servants told us, retired to her room ill. But as to causes, I could tell you what I overheard, just before she fainted last night. Hark you, friar!"

But before he could add more, a man in a dusty dress came up and took Mardocchi by the arm, saying, "I wish to speak with you in private, father."

Mardocchi stepped aside with him, and the other continued, in a low voice, "Mount your mule instantly and speed to Forli. The Duke sends you word he has need of you."

"What duke?" asked Mardocchi; "and what token does he send?"

"The Duke Valentinois, to be sure," replied the man; "do you not remember me? I have seen you at the Borgia Palace a dozen times three years ago. As for the token, he says, By the

horse, and the month, and the Church of San Bartholomew, come to him!"

"Will not to-morrow do?" asked Mardocchi.  
"I have matters of importance to see to to-day."

"No," replied the other; "Don Cæsar says what has to be done must be done to-night. You have four-and-twenty miles to ride, and it is now near one hour past noon."

"Well, I will speed," said the friar; "I promised always to be ready at his bidding, and I never fail to keep my word. But I have a letter to write—nay, it is but short—ten words are enough. I will but step into this scrivener's and borrow pen and paper. Then I will go for my mule. It is a quick beast and enduring, and I shall reach Forli ere night."

Thus saying, he sped away, and, procuring the means of writing, considered for one moment, and then decided on the words he was to use for

the purpose of conveying his meaning without betraying his secret.

"Illustrious lord," he wrote at length, "my part of the business is over. I have confessed my penitent and given her the viaticum. It is for you to discover whether she came to her present state fairly; and, I doubt not, if her chamber is closely searched, and her woman examined, enough will be made manifest to fix the guilt upon the right person. Go slowly and go surely. I am called suddenly to Forli by commands I dare not disobey; but, if possible, I will be in Imola again ere to-morrow night."

He read the words over more than once, and then saying, "That discloses nothing," folded the paper and sealed it. His next consideration was by whose hands he should convey it to Ramiro d'Orco. The scrivener himself was an old acquaintance; and, after some thought, he decided

to entrust the letter to him. Many were the injunctions he laid upon him to deliver it immediately on the Lord of Imola's return: and then he sought his mule and set out for Forli.

But the scrivener was fond of knowing every one's secrets—it was part of his profession in those days. Thus the seal of the letter was not very long intact. The contents puzzled the old man. He saw there was a double meaning; but he could not divine the enigma. "I will find out by-and-bye," he said; and, sitting down, he deliberately took a copy of the letter. Then, by a process still well known in Italy, he sealed it up again, so that no eye could detect that the cover had been opened.

About half an hour after all this had been done, people were seen hurrying through the streets, and symptoms of agitation and terror were apparent in the town.

"What is the matter? what is the matter,

Signor Medico?" asked the scrivener, running out from his booth, and catching the sleeve of a physician who was walking more slowly than the rest.

"The Countess Visconti, the lady of the prefect, has been poisoned, they say," replied the physician. "I know no more about it, for they did not send for me, or perhaps I might have saved her."

"Then she is dead?" asked the scrivener.

"Ay, dead enough," answered the other, and walked on.

The scrivener had his own thoughts; but the name of Ramiro d'Orco had become somewhat terrible in Imola, and Mardocchi's letter was safely delivered as soon as that nobleman returned.

## CHAPTER XIV.

THE air was balmy, the breeze was fresh and strong, the large masses of clouds, like spirit thrones, floated buoyant over the sky, followed by the dancing sunshine. The manes of the horses waved wildly in the wind, and their wide nostrils expanded to take in the delicious air. The influence of the hour and scene spread to the heart of Lorenzo Visconti, and seemed, for the time at least, to banish the thought of sorrow and of ill. Out of the city, with the wide country between Imola and Ravenna stretching in deep blue waving lines before his eyes, the

wind refreshing his brow and fanning his cheek, and his noble horse bounding proudly under him, a sense of freedom from earthly shackles, and the hard bond of fate came over him. It sparkled in his eye, it beamed upon his lip.

Ramiro d'Orco gazed upon him, and his aspect, more like what it had been in early youth, brought back the thought of other days. Did they soften that hard, obdurate heart? Did they mollify the stern, dark purposes within his breast? Oh, no! He only thought, "Soon—very soon!" And if there was any change in his feelings, it was but inasmuch that the momentary relief—the temporary joy in Lorenzo's aspect promised to give zest to his revenge, and add pangs to the sufferings he hoped to inflict.

Yet he was courteous, gentle—oh, marvellously courteous. To have seen him, one would have

thought he was riding by the side of his dearest friend; no one could have dreamed that there was one rankling passion in his breast. Grave he was truly, but he was always grave. The expression of his countenance, shaded by the long, iron-grey hair, was even somewhat stern; but his words were smooth, and even kind; and there was a sort of rigid grace about him, like that of some statues, which gave force to all he said. They rode on (their two trains mingling together) for about ten miles from Imola, and then Ramiro, pointing with his hand to a low hill on the right, told Lorenzo that just beyond that rise there had been lately found a curious ancient tomb, apparently of an earlier date than any known Roman monument.

"We will go and see it," he said; "we shall have plenty of time. 'Tis but a quarter of a mile from the road."

Lorenzo willingly consented: but when they



had passed the rise, and were turning from the road to the right, some white objects rose over the slope, and a few steps more showed several line of tents, with sentries on guard, and horses picketted near.

"Ha! what is this?" exclaimed Ramiro d'Orco, with a look of displeasure manifest on his countenance.

"Troops of France, my good lord," replied Lorenzo. "Do you not see the banners? Probably your relation, the Lord De Vitry, with the auxiliary force promised to his highness the Duke of Valentinois."

"It is strange, my lord prefect, that they should be camped on this side of Imola," said Ramiro; "they were more needed at Forli, methinks."

He had drawn in his bridle while speaking, as if hesitating whether he should go on or turn back; but Lorenzo spurred forward at once, and

was already speaking to the sentries, when the other came up.

They were led almost immediately into the camp, and welcomed by De Vitry at the door of his tent.

"Come in, nobles," he said, "come in; you are just in time to crush a cup of right French wine with me. Good faith, I and the great maestro were about to drain the goblet. He has promised to paint me a portrait, Signor Ramiro, of your fair relation, my sweet Blanche; and I tell him if he wants the picture of an angel for any of his great pictures, he shall have the portrait to copy at his wish."

Something common-place was said by Ramiro d'Orco in reply, and all three entered the tent, where they found Leonardo da Vinci seated with a cup of wine before him, but in dusty apparel, and with a very grave expression of countenance. The ceremonious salutations of

the day took place, and some fine wine of the Rhone was handed round; but de Vitry was more abrupt and thoughtful than ordinary. At length he rose, and beckoned Lorenzo aside, saying:

"I want to speak to you, Visconti. How long are you from Forli?"

"But a few days," replied Lorenzo, following him; "I suppose you have stopped the intended succour?"

De Vitry made no answer to this half question, but whispered hastily—

"I understand it all; everything shall be done as he says. Devil take that Antonio! what has he gone away for, just at such an emergency?"

"My noble friend, I know not what you mean," replied Lorenzo; "where has he gone? what emergency?"

Ere De Vitry could answer, Ramiro d'Orco

had risen, and, with a bland smile upon his lip, was approaching them.

"I crave pardon, noble lords," he said, "but if we pursue not our journey soon, signor, we shall not reach Imola ere dark."

"Do not let me detain you," said De Vitry, with his usual frank, soldier-like manner. "Tell the Duke, Visconti, that I think all danger past, but that I will hold my ground till the last-named day has seen the sun set, and then retire to Ravenna. My lord of Imola, I ought to have paid my respects to you yesterday, but we were all tired with a long march. To-morrow, when the sun is declining, I will be with you; but, I beg, no ceremony. I come but scantily attended, and form and display are needless. Will you not taste more wine?"

Both Ramiro and Lorenzo declined; and the former felt well satisfied when he saw the readiness with which the young prefect accompanied

him, for evil purposes are always suspicious, and he had thought the few words spoken in private between Lorenzo and De Vitry must have some reference to himself.

"He suspects nothing," he thought, as they remounted and rode on; "but how could he? I am too eager. Like a boy chasing a butterfly, or a youth a woman, I fear the prize will escape me, even when it is within my grasp."

The rest of the journey was uninteresting. The two cavaliers soon reached the object to which their steps tended—a small town, or rather village, which Ramiro was fortifying, to command a pass through a morass. The Etruscan tomb was forgotten, and their return to Imola was made by a narrower and steeper, but much shorter path, which brought them to the gates just as the sun had set.

A single lantern, which hung from the

vault of the arched gateway, gave them barely light to guide their horses, and as it fell upon the dark countenances of the guard. Lorenzo thought, "It feels like entering a prison."

At this moment a man stepped out of the shadow and handed Ramiro d'Orco a paper, with the one word "important."

"A light! bring me a light!" exclaimed the Lord of Imola; and, with some difficulty, a torch was lighted at the lantern, and held up so that he could read. The contents of the letter seemed to puzzle him for a moment, but gradually his pale cheek flushed, and his eye flashed with a triumphant light.

"Here we must fain part for the night, my lord prefect," he said. "You take to the bishop's square, and I, I am sorry to say, back to the castle, for business of importance will keep me there to-night. We shall meet again to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night," replied Lorenzo; and he turned his horse into the street just within the walls.

"Oh, my lord, my lord," cried a voice, ere he had ridden a hundred yards, "what news I have to tell you! Alas! alas! my lady is dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Lorenzo, throwing his horse almost on his haunches by the suddenness with which he reined him up; "dead! The man is mad! Why, Basil, what do you mean?"

"Too true, too true, my noble lord," replied the Frenchman; "she died at two o'clock—quite suddenly. But come up, my lord. 'Tis ill talking of such things here in the street."

Lorenzo spurred on his horse; and oh! what a tumult of wild feelings were in his heart! But there was one predominant. It was regret

—almost remorse. He had spoken harshly, he thought—had acted harshly. She had felt it more than he believed she could or would, as her fainting on the previous night had shown. True, she had given abundant cause for harsh words, and even harsher acts than he had used. But the cause was forgotten in the thought of one so young, so beautiful, so full of happy life, being laid suddenly in the cold grave. A thousand times had he wished that he had never seen her; but, now that she was gone, he would have given his right hand to recall her to life. He reached the palace; he sprang from his horse and rushed in. He heard the confused tale of the servants, and he sprang up the stairs; but, as he went, his pace slackened. An awe came over him; and he trod the corridor as if his step could have awakened the dead. With a trembling hand he opened the door, and entered the chamber of death. There were lights at the



head and at the feet of the corpse, with two of Eloise's maids—Giovanetta and another—seated one on either side. Late autumn flowers were strewed on the fair form of the poor girl, cut off in her young spring, and the painful odour of the death incense spread a sickly perfume through the room.

Lorenzo approached with slow and silent tread, uncovered the face, and gazed at it for a moment. Then kneeling by the bedside, he took one of her marble-cold hands in his and pressed his lips upon it. A few tears fell upon the alabaster skin, and rising, he beckoned Giovanetta toward the adjoining room.

At the door he paused, and said in a low voice—

“You may both retire; but be near at hand; I will watch beside her.”

“You, my lord!” exclaimed the girl.

"I," answered Lorenzo: "why not I? But mark me, lock the door. I will watch here, and when the priests return, say I will have nothing farther done till to-morrow. She must lie as she is now. There is something strange here, girl, on which I must be satisfied."

"Ay, strange indeed," said Giovanetta.

"Well, it must be unravelled before a grain of earth falls upon her," replied Lorenzo, "Now leave me; I cannot talk more to-night."

"I must tell you my lady's last words," said the girl: "it was her command. In the agony of death, she cried, 'My husband! my husband! tell him I never sinned against him as he thought—tell him I have been faithful to him.' That is what she said."

"Oh, God! Do not torture me!" cried Lorenzo, waving her away. The girl returned

into the chamber of the dead, and whispered a few words to her companion. Then both rose and retired, locking the door behind them.

Lorenzo seated himself in the large chair, so that he could see through the open door the bed and its inanimate burden. I will not attempt to trace his feelings. Twice he rose, went to the bedside, gazed upon the pale face, and returned to his watching place; and often he covered his eyes with his hands. There were various sounds without—the return of priests—the movements of the servants; but he gave them no heed; and shortly all was silent again.

At length there came a nearer sound. It seemed in the room beside him—near, very near; and Lorenzo, starting, turned his head. Suddenly his arms were seized by two strong men, and a third put his hand upon the hilt of

Lorenzo's sword to prevent him from drawing it. "You are our prisoner, my lord prefect," said one of the men, "charged with the murder of your wife. Come with us without resistance, for resistance is vain. The palace is in our hands."

Lorenzo gazed round from one to another, and perceived that there were several more figures at the door. He had no thought of resistance, however. Taken by surprise at a moment when his mind was overpowered with grief and horror, the fire of his character was quite subdued.

"The murder of my wife!" he said, "the murder of my wife! Who dares to charge me? Who is mad enough to accuse me?"

"Of that we know nothing, my lord," replied the man who had before spoken; "but you must come with us."

Silently, and without even caring to take his bonnet from the table, he accompanied his cap-

tors, looking round the vacant corridors and halls with a feeling of desolation words cannot convey. Not one of all his servants was to be seen; no familiar face presented itself; he was all alone in the hands of an enemy. The truth had flashed upon his mind at length, but how he knew not. Was it an instinct? Was it the accumulated memories of many little incidents in the past, each next to nothing by itself, but swelling to a mountain by the piling of one small grain upon another, which showed him now, that Ramiro d'Orco was his foe, and had been compassing his destruction? Or was it that a dark and terrible—almost prophetic warning, which that same man had given him in the palace of Cæsar Borgia, came back to his recollection then?

That same man had said that he never forgave—that he never forgot—that years might pass, circumstances change, the chain between the present and the past seemed severed altogether,

and yet the memory of an injury remain the only adamant link unbroken. Lorenzo remembered the words even then, as they marched him through the cold, dark streets towards the citadel. He remembered, too, that by a fatal error Ramiro had been led to think he had slighted his alliance, destroyed his daughter's happiness, and treated her with scorn and neglect. And now every courtesy he had received since he came to Imola recurred to his memory as a menace which he should have heeded, every smile as a lure which should have been avoided. How could he suppose, he asked himself, that such a man as that would forget so great an injury; how could he believe that he would so hospitably receive the injurer without some dark and deadly purpose beneath the smooth exterior?

Thought after thought, all painful, flashed through his brain. They were many—innumerable; and, ere he could give them any clear and

definite order, the gates of the citadel were opened for his entrance, and a few minutes after, the low, damp dungeon of a murderer received him. They left him in solitude and in darkness to all the bitterness of thought; and then all that was to follow presented itself to his mind in full and terrible array—the trial: the death; the disgrace; the blighted name; the everlasting infamy. Oh! for the battle-field, the cannon's roar, the splintering lance, the grinding wound, the death of triumph and of glory!

Vain wishes: the heavy iron door was there, barring from every active scene of life; but that was not all he had to suffer that night. To the felon's dungeon was to be added the felon's chains. The door opened, the torchlight flashed in; fetters were placed upon his hands and ankles, and the ring of the chain was fastened to a ring in the wall. The guard withdrew, but left the door ajar, and a narrow line of light

marked the entrance. It grew fainter and fainter as the torches receded, and then a human figure, like a dark shadow, crossed the light as it became broader while some one entered.

Could it be any one to bring him comfort? Oh no. The well-known voice of Ramiro d'Orco spoke in its cold, calm accents.

‘Young man,’ it said, ‘you should beware when you are well warned. My lord prefect, you have to die to-morrow. Make your peace with God, for there is no help for you on earth. You shall have a fair trial in our court, that all the world may know the proud Lorenzo Visconti has not been condemned unjustly, but is truly guilty of the murder of a poor defenceless woman—his own wife—and that history may record the fact among the famous deeds of the great house of Milan. The proofs admit of no doubt; so be



prepared; and when the axe is about to fall, remember me and Leonora d'Orco."

"Man, you are deceived!" exclaimed Lorenzo. But Ramiro waited no reply, and the heavy key turned in the open door.

## CHAPTER XV.

It was a bright and sunshiny morning—considering the season of the year, more summer-like and warm than usual—and Leonora d'Orco sat in her beautiful little garden without covering for her head, and with her rich black hair in less trim array than usual, falling over her lovely neck and shoulders. Her eyes were fixed upon the fountain in its marble basin just before her, and there was something calm but melancholy in their gaze. She watched the water as it sprung bounding up, and then fell again in glittering drops, and presently the long, jetty eyelashes overflowed with tears.

"Poor unhappy girl!" she murmured: "the fountain of bright life is dried up for her—the gay and sparkling drops all spent. Oh Eloise—poor Eloise!"

One of her maids came out and stood by her side; but Leonora did not notice her, although the girl seemed anxious to tell her something. Her lady turned away her eyes. Below, at the distance of about half a mile, lay the city, with its dark walls and citadel strongly marked out in the clear light, and she saw a horseman riding up at headlong speed.

"Who is that coming, Carlotta?" asked Leonora. "It is not my father surely."

"Oh, no, signora," replied the girl. "It looks like the maestro. He will speak to you of what I was going to tell you."

"What were you going to tell?" asked Leonora with sudden eagerness.

"Oh! bad news, signora—nothing but bad

news now," replied the girl; "they say—I don't know how true it is, but Marco told me—they say that the lord prefect was arrested last night by the Signor Ramiro's order, for poisoning his lady."

Leonora started up with a face as pale as death; but, after gazing on the girl for a moment with a wild look, she seated herself again and put her hand to her head.

Two minutes had hardly passed ere Leonardo was seen hurrying along the terrace, and the next moment he took her hand and kissed it.

"Pardon, dear lady, pardon my abruptness; but I have no time to lose."

"Speak! speak!" cried Leonora, in a low but firm tone. "Let me hear all and quickly."

"The trial is over," said Leonardo. "Your father would not preside; but his creatures have

condemned him. No time was allowed to summon other witnesses. Some poison, concealed in the case of a portrait known to be Lorenzo's was found in the unhappy lady's chamber; a girl called Giovanetta testified that her mistress and Friar Peter both told her that two papers—one of which she tried upon a dog who died instantly, and the other which her mistress took—were given to the countess by her husband. Some other small circumstances of suspicion appeared, and on this he was condemned, although there were numerous inconsistencies. He is innocent, believe me; but in two hours he will be done to death before the south gate, unless your father can be persuaded to respite him. There are many in the town that are sure of his innocence, but too few I fear—”

“He is innocent! he is innocent!” cried Leonora, with her brow burning, and her

cheek pale. "He is innocent as a babe. I will go down—I will return with you—I will see my father—I will save him or die with him."

"But, lady, they will let no one enter the town," said Leonardo; "they have trebled the sentries at the gates. All may come forth who will, but no one can return. So they told me as I passed; and, unless you have the key of the postern, as you once had, I fear—"

"I have—I have," said Leonora; "stay but one moment."

She flew into the house and was but an instant gone. Leonardo saw her hide something like a small vial in her bosom, but the large key was in her hand; and merely beckoning him to follow, she ran down the steps of the terrace, and through the garden toward the gate. Leonardo followed rapidly, merely saying to the girl—

"Send down my horse to the gate."

Leonora was at the postern first, however, but her hands so trembled she could not put the key in the lock. The painter took it from her, opened the little gate, and, passing in, she sped on towards the citadel. She did not observe that Leonardo was no longer with her; but, with frantic speed, and hair escaped from all its bindings, she sped on through the almost deserted streets till she reached the gates of the citadel.

"Where is my father?" she cried; "where is the Lord of Imola?"

"Why, lady," replied a man standing beside the sentinel, "he is not here; he is in the bishop's piazza, waiting till the execution is over. This is a terrible day, and will bring ruin on the city, I can see."

But ere his last words were uttered, Leonora was gone.

Ramiro d'Orco truly stood in the square before the bishop's palace, which was not two hundred yards from the south gate. His arms were crossed upon his chest; his head was held high, his brow contracted; his jaws so firmly set, that when he spoke, in answer to any of the lords and officers who surrounded him, the sounds issued from between his teeth, and his lips were hardly seen to move.

"Do you not think, my lord, this is very dangerous," said one; "do you remember he is the prefect?"

"He himself decided yesterday at this very hour, that no rank can shield a murderer from death," replied Ramiro d'Orco.

"He made no defence," said another, "but denied the competence of your court, declared the charge a lie, and appealed to the Pope and the King of France."



"He himself pronounced my court competent to all high justice, yesterday," said Ramiro, drily. "Let him appeal. When his head is off, they cannot put it on again. No more of this. He dies, if I live!"

A short pause ensued, and then a man was seen running rapidly up the street which led toward the south gate.

"Who is this?" asked Ramiro d'Orco. "They have not called noon from the belfry yet, have they?"

"No, my lord," answered a young priest; "it wants half an hour of noon. But they have taken the prisoner down to the gate," he added, well comprehending what was going on in the heart of his lord. "I saw them pass as I came up a minute ago. But what has this fellow got in his arms?"

"He is one of the guards from the gates,"

said another; "and, by my life, I think they must have anticipated the hour, for that is a man's head he is carrying."

"No great evil," murmured Ramiro d'Orco; but a moment after a soldier reached the spot where they stood, and laid a bloody head at Ramiro's feet. All, however, remarked that the hair was somewhat grey, and the crown shaved.

"A pennon of horse from his Highness the Duke of Valentinois is at the gate, my lord, seeking admission," said the messenger, almost breathless. "We did not not admit them as your lordship had ordered the gates not to be opened; but the leader threw this head in through the wicket, saying that the duke had sent it to you for the love he bears you. It is Friar Peter's head, my lord; do you not see? and the officer says he confessed last night having poisoned the Countess Visconti. What are we to do?"

A murmur of horror ran through the little crowd around, and a look of relief and satisfaction at the timely intervention spread over almost every countenance except that of Ramiro d'Orco, whose brow had gathered into a deeper frown than ever.

"What are we to do with the lord prefect?" asked the man again.

"Hence, meddling fool!" exclaimed Ramiro d'Orco, stamping his foot upon the ground. "Strike off his head! The sentence of my court shall not be reversed. Strike off his head, I say! Wait no longer—'twill be noon ere you reach the gate again. Away! Then open the gates. But mark me, no delay, as you value your own life! Go fast, sirrah! Have your feet no strength?"

The soldier ran down the street in haste, and Ramiro turned his eyes from the pained and anxious countenances around him; but it was

only to meet a sight that affected him still more.

"Oh! I would have been spared this!" he cried, as Leonora rushed toward him and cast herself at his feet.

"My lord—my father!" she exclaimed, stretching out her hands towards him, "spare him! spare him! He is innocent—you know he is innocent! Lose not a moment—send down the pardon—some gentleman run down. He pardons him. Be quick! oh be quick!"

"Hold, on your lives!" cried Ramiro d'Orco, in a voice of thunder. "Hence, girl. Take her away—some one take her away. He dies, if I live!"

"Then hear, Ramiro d'Orco!" cried Leonora, "send me to the block instead of him. I poisoned her more surely than he did. See, here is the poison. I am ready; take me to the block! I confess the crime. But hear me, lords

and gentlemen all: Lorenzo Visconti is innocent—inno- cent of the death of his poor wife—inno- cent of the neglect and insult my father thinks he offered me, and for which, in truth, he does him to death; innocent of all offence, as this hard parent will find when we are both in our still graves.”

“Ha! what is that?” exclaimed her father, gazing at her; “she raves—take her away!”

“I rave not. It is all true,” cried Leonora; “so help me God, as he has explained all. Will you send the pardon now? Oh, speak! speak!”

“It is too late,” said Ramiro, in a low and gloomy tone, pointing with his hand down the street.

Leonora turned and gazed, with her eyes almost starting from her head. Four men were carrying a bier with something stretched upon it, and a cloak thrown over all. Leonora sprung

upon her feet, uttered a shriek that rung through the whole square, and then fell senseless on the ground.

A brief lapse of forgetfulness came to that wrung and agonized heart, and then she opened her eyes, but she closed them quickly again. She fancied she was in a dream. What was it she thought she saw? The face of Lorenzo Visconti bending over her; French soldiers all armed; the banners of the Church mingled with others she knew not. Oh, it was a dream—a deceitful dream!

“Let me take her, Lorenzo,” said a voice she had not heard for years; “joy kills as well as sorrow. Leonora—cousin Leonora, it is De Vitry: wake up—wake up. Things are not so bad as they seemed. It was the corpse of a murdering villain you saw, justly condemned to death yesterday at this hour. Visconti is safe.”

Leonora opened her eyes again, and found herself in the arms of De Vitry. She gazed anxiously round. There stood Lorenzo with his head uncovered, and his upper garment off; and a smile, like that of an angel, came upon her lips; but when he advanced a step towards her, she shrunk back in De Vitry's arms, murmuring, "Take me to my father! Oh! where is my father?" and, covering her eyes with her hands, she wept profusely.

"A litter is coming speedily from the inn there," said Leonardo da Vinci; "let me escort her, my lord. You have other matters to attend to just now, and she will be well in privacy for a time. Here comes Antonio with a litter."

De Vitry lifted her in his stalwart arms, and placed her, as tenderly as if she had been an infant, in the sort of covered bier then commonly used in Italy by ladies too feeble or too timid to

travel on horseback. Leonardo drew the curtains round; but, leaning his hand upon the wood-work, he walked on by her side, while four stout bearers carried her on toward the gate leading to the villa. Twice Leonora drew back the curtain and looked out. Once she asked "Where is my father? Is this all true, Signor Maestro, or am I dreaming still?"

"Your father is at the citadel waiting for the French and Roman lords," replied Leonardo. "All is real, my child, and happy is it that it is so; for both Antonio and I had nearly been too late. The number of men we could introduce last night was too small; and, had you not left the postern key in my hands, the Lord of Vitry and the French forces could hardly have entered ere the axe had fallen."

Leonora shuddered and let fall the curtain; but after a moment or two she looked out again on the other side, saying—



"Oh! good Antonio, is that you? Surely I saw him—surely I saw your lord."

"Yes, dear lady, you saw him safe," replied Antonio; "we were preparing to force the gate; but we should have been too late had not the maestro brought round the French forces from the other side of the town and let us in."

"God be praised!" murmured Leonora; "but oh, Antonio, does any one believe him guilty still? If they do, that will kill him by a sharper death than that of the axe."

"No one does—no one can," replied Antonio. "Mardocchi—that is, Father Peter—made full confession last night of the darkest and most damnable plot that ever was hatched. I could not tell the Duke of Valentino all, for there were many things I could not discover; but when I showed him plainly that Mardocchi had betrayed some of his most terrible secrets, he had him put to the torture; and then the bloody-

ly I- minded knave confessed the whole, filling up all  
the gaps that my tale had left. The duke  
plie showed no reverence for his shaved head, but  
gate struck it off, and sent it to Imola, with his  
the whole evidence written down by the Dominican  
free who was there present. No, no, lady, no one  
can entertain even a suspicion now."

"Thank God for that also," said Leonora, in  
a low tone. "Oh, this has been a terrible  
day."

Again she let fall the curtain of the litter;  
and the bearers moved slowly up the hill. They  
carried her along the terrace to her own saloon;  
but when they stopped, and Leonardo would  
have aided her to descend, they found her sound  
asleep.

Tired nature, exhausted with the conflict of  
passions, had given way, and slumber had sealed  
her eyes at the first touch of returning peace.

There was a sweet, well-contented smile upon her lips, but Leonardo marked a bright red spot upon her cheek; and calling her maids to her, he himself staid at the villa till she awoke. The burning fever was already upon her; her words were incoherent, her pulse beating terribly. For fourteen days Leonora d'Orco hung between life and death; and happy was it, perhaps, that anything occurred to place a veil between her eyes and the last terrible act of the drama in which she herself had borne so conspicuous a part.

Every one at all acquainted with Italian history knows what followed; how Cæsar Borgia, about four days after the events last recorded had taken place, commanded the personal attendance of Ramiro d'Orco on his terrible and treacherous march to Senegaglia; how Ramiro found himself compelled to obey, both by the presence

of the French and the papal troops in his capital, and by fear lest his machinations against Lorenzo Visconti should be too closely investigated; and how his dead body was found one morning cut in two pieces, in the market-place of Bologna. None knew how he died, or by whose command; and Leonora never suspected that he had suffered a violent death.

That he was dead they told her as soon as she could bear such tidings; and under the escort of De Vitry and his forces she joined Bianca Maria and returned, after some months, to the Milanese. At the end of some fifteen or sixteen months Lorenzo Visconti and Leonora d'Orco cast off the garb of mourning, and united their fates for ever. It was on the day when she reached her twenty-first birth-day; and if the reader will look back through this veracious history, he will see that few so young have ever

gone through such varied and terrible griefs and trials; nor will he wonder that, while I say Leonora d'Orco was at last happy, I add, that a shade of melancholy mingled with her joy, and that the dark cloud of memory still hung over the past, forming a sombre background to the sparkling sunshine of the present.

THE END.



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Reader's Surname

(No. of Seat)



